Sunsunsun
Illustrated by
Momoco
10
Alya
Sometimes Hides Her
Feelings in
Russian
Fan TL
Glucose
Translations

Внезапно
Alya
Sometimes Hides Her
Feelings in
Russian
Fan TL

【Wanna check...
if they'll
sandwich it?】

“Uhhh, this, well... is kind of a half-funny story...”

"Ah, g'morning, Kuze-kun."
"Good morning, Masachika-sama."

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Angel Ayano with a syringe.

Buffs her allies using the syringe she holds.

Иногда Аля внезапно кокетничает по-русски

角川スニーカー文庫

illustration by ももこ

Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings In Russian Volume 10 Fan Translation

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About the Translators

We are a small nonprofit fan translation group, consisting solely of a group of friends taking on the roles of translators, accuracy checkers, editors, and proofreaders.

Our operation mainly involves hand translating, with machine translators used only solely as minor pieces of reference material and structural guides (whether it be ChatGPT, DeepL, Papago; no difference when it comes to how we do things, really). We take the tedious effort to analyze and reference the original JP texts line by line, phrase by phrase, and often character by character, in order to build our own translation from the ground up that conveys all nuances from the original text accurately.

Paired with the use of English creative writing skills (all of our main staff members are native speakers with strong academic/literary backgrounds), our approach strives to find the sweet balance between localization and foreignization, localizing phrases, references, and proverbs/idioms where accuracy of nuances can be maintained, while opting to keep unique and culturally distinctive cases, and going for a mix of both when it works.

We proudly claim our methodology and grueling efforts result in translations that read more naturally rather than robotically or ESL-like, with nuances within narration and dialogue conveyed distinctly and accurately, making characters true to their original tones rather than sounding all the same, bland, or inaccurate: a common issue found in most barely edited/tweaked ChatGPT translations (or other MTL slop/spam).

For more information about the difference between a proper translation and MTL spam/slop (or ones done by an ESL speaker), please read this document. If you care about our translations, or light novels in general, then ***please contribute to our cause by spreading this document and message as far as possible***. Together, we can raise awareness, inform the ignorant, and ensure that the light novel fan translating community becomes a more transparent space: one that prioritizes reader comfort and experience above all else.

Now it's true that this hasn't always been the case for us, with our older fan translations (2023 and prior, and even maybe some from 2024) lacking in quality to our newer ones. We highly recommend buying and reading official translations in those aforementioned cases.

We're always trying to improve the reader experience, so feel free to give us some feedback in the comments or through our Discord!

Want to contact us?

Feel free to contact us at glucosetranslations@gmail.com for any inquiries.

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Prologue - Li'l Sister Mode, Activate

"When I was still really little… I was an unbelievably mischievous troublemaker."

That was how Yuki began her story—an opening so hard to believe at face value, it made Alisa feel a painful tightness in her chest.

Masachika had told her as well—Yuki's childhood had been defined by her unusually strong curiosity and energy that knew no limits. But then, sickness came and robbed her of her freedom, plunging her into a grueling battle against her own body. Yet as she suffered through it all, her only concern was what she could do for her family.

"…!" Alisa couldn't help but gasp.

Yuki wasn't speaking because she wanted some cheap sympathy. Alisa understood that very well. Just listening to her story didn't mean she could even begin to claim that she understood the pain and anguish Yuki had gone through. She knew that.

But still…!

"*Hhk…*"

Her eyes already narrowing, Alisa desperately fought back the tears that threatened to trickle down her cheeks. Yuki's words had struck her heart so deeply that she couldn't endure it otherwise.

How brave, how selfless she had been.

The Yuki known throughout their school, who symbolized the epitome of refinement and grace, had been shaped and sculpted by relentless resilience and boundless love.

“And I realized something. Like, ah, all I’m doing is just making nii-sama feel guilty,” Yuki spoke with a pained expression in front of Alisa, who was doing her best to hold back her own tears herself.

Alisa already knew what came next. Masachika had… told her, after all.

“So I thought that if all being the capable, ‘good girl’ version of myself did was make nii-sama feel guilty, then maybe… maybe I should just go ahead and become his silly li’l sis again. A ridiculously cute one at that. So I studied a lot of manga and anime to figure out how to pull it off. *Fufu*, kind of childish, amirite?” She let out a small laugh, smiling softly as if amused by her past self, before then turning to Alisa with a playful look. “Did you know? The reason nii-sama… Masachika-kun became this massive otaku was actually because *I* converted him?”

“…That’s a surprise,” Alisa replied with a smile that looked like it was on the verge of breaking into a cry or laugh in response to Yuki’s slightly mischievous tone.

Without seeming particularly concerned by her reaction, Yuki continued on cheerfully.

“He was actually really confused when I suddenly changed how I acted and started recommending manga to him.”

She then proceeded to reminisce about her memories with her brother, without the faintest hint of pain or darkness in her voice.

By wholeheartedly playing the role of the silly, cute little sister, she’d steadily shortened the distance between them.

There’s… no way I can blame them for this… Alisa couldn’t help but close her eyes and think as she listened to that bright, yet achingly bittersweet, recollection.

She felt ashamed—ashamed that even the tiniest part of her had resented the fact that the both of them were hiding their tight, sibling kinship.

The bond between the two wasn’t simply something that outsiders could casually touch upon. In fact, she should be grateful that they had even chosen to share a glimpse of it with her.

As those swirly, negative emotions eventually cleared away, replaced by a calm and gentle warmth, Alisa opened her eyes, just in time to hear the end of Yuki's story.

"And gradually, nii-sama eventually started to smile like he used to… *Fufu*, honestly… looking back on it, there were definitely better ways I could've gone about it…" Yuki confessed, her smile slowly fading. Her eyes lifted toward the empty air above her, her expression becoming sincere, as if she were whispering a prayer. "But even so, I… I just wanted my beloved nii-sama to smile like he used to."

It was the purest kind of love.

A breathtaking outpouring of emotions, radiant to the point of almost seeming divine. Having witnessed that sparkle, a single tear began to fall from Alisa's eye.

Or so it almost did…

Just then, at that moment, Yuki suddenly grinned, beaming as she leaned her cheek lazily on the armrest of her chair with a thump, plopping one leg over the other in an utterly and insolently relaxed posture. Giving Alisa a sly sidelong glance, she ended her tale with a smug flourish.

"So, that's how ***I***[1] was born," she declared with a clearly changed tone.

"……"

???

"……"

What… just happened? Alisa thought, eyes blinking rapidly.

She looked up, and then back down. Yep, still with the smug face alright.

Huhhh??

"…?"

She lowered her eyes, pressed her fingers to her temple, and tried to make sense of it.

Oh? Tears? Ah, yeah, those were gone. Just like that. Instantly. Poof. Vanished.

Uhhh… wait. What's going on here?

Her friend's sudden transformation had her stunned so deeply that her thoughts simply struggled to keep up.

*'**I**'? Wait, '**I**'??? I definitely didn't mishear that, right? Right…? No, uh, huuuh?*

The more she tried to process it, the more lost she became.

Until…

A memory suddenly resurfaced—something Masachika had told her a long time ago.

"She's not exactly the demure ladylike person she seems to be at first. She's just teasing you, getting you flustered, and enjoying every single bit of it."

On top of that, there was also what Yuki herself had proclaimed earlier.

"I was an unbelievably mischievous troublemaker."

Which meant… this current version of Yuki was the real her…

And the one Alisa had thought she knew well all along…?

"Was all of it…"

"Hm?"

"Was all of it… an act?"

Those words, that very question, slipped from her mouth before she realized. And before Alisa could even regret asking it, Yuki coolly crossed her legs again and smirked mockingly.

"That's right…"

"!"

"And that, my friend, is what makes me so damn adorable."

“???”

???????????

[1]: There are three general ways to refer to oneself in Japanese.

私 (watashi わたし, atashi あたし): A neutral and polite way to refer to oneself (“atashi” being the more feminine/softer variant), used in the most formal of settings.

僕 (boku ぼく): Generally used by males in more informal contexts. Is more casual than “watashi” but is still modest.

俺 (ore おれ): Very informal and masculine to refer to oneself. Most commonly used among close friends or in very casual settings. Can come off as rough and arrogant when used inappropriately.

Yuki uses 俺 (ore おれ) here.

Chapter 1 - Tremble Before My Overwhelming Cuteness!

The sun had completely set, and the room was now consumed by a gentle darkness. The two girls faced each other—Yuki with a fearless grin, legs crossed with an imperious sense of ease, while Alisa sat completely frozen, her brain overwhelmed by a figurative tsunami of question marks. Silence enveloped the space between them.

Adorable? Ador…able? Is this… some kind of Japanese word I don't know? A technical term? Or maybe a youth or internet slang, or something?

Yuki's statement had been so incomprehensible to her that Alisa had begun to doubt whether or not they were even thinking about the same "adorable" that she knew. Yet, no matter how hard she tried to break up Yuki's words or interpret them differently, no definite answer came to mind. Finally giving up, she voiced her question outright.

"…What do you mean?"

Yuki arched one brow in response. But immediately after, as if understanding what Alisa was struggling with, she gave a slow nod, lowering her gaze with a strangely melancholic expression.

"I see. Basically, you're saying you want me to explain it in a way you'll understand…" she spoke.

"Y-yeah."

"To explain this cuteness of mine…"

"Y-yeah…?"

Yup, something was wrong—the two were speaking Japanese, but Alisa's words just weren't getting through. This wasn't like one of Maria's airhead episodes; this was on a different dimension of broken conversation.

No wait… Who even is *this? Someone else? No, that can't be. Right?*

For just a split second, the theory of Yuki having a secret twin seriously crossed Alisa's mind, but she quickly dismissed it. If that were true, then none of the conversations the two have had so far would have made any sense.

But in that case… Who, well, is this exactly?

"???"

The more she thought, the more tangled Alisa's thoughts became, as if she'd suddenly stumbled into some surreal alternate dimension.

Her brain had slowed down to a crawl—almost a complete halt—and Alisa could only blink in confusion. In front of her, Yuki stood up from her chair, dramatically placing one hand over her forehead as she slowly tilted her head back.

"Very well… Seeing *is* believing," she murmured before sweeping her right hand arm in an instant, covering her left eye in a deliberately sensual motion before flaring her right eye open as if some thunderous roar echoed behind her as she proudly declared her next statement. "Feast your eyes! Witness this overwhelming cuteness of ***mine***[1]."

"Ah, no, that's quite alright," Alisa reflexively answered in polite speech, with Yuki then plopping back onto her chair in a huff, sulking like a child denied their toy.

"…Oh, okay then," she uttered as she did so.

Who is this??? Alisa thought as her inner alarm of puzzlement grew even louder. Yet, in spite of that, she couldn't help but feel a strange sense of guilt creeping into her heart.

Quickly trying to backtrack, Alisa fumbled for a follow-up.

"Ah, um, well, you don't have to show me or anything; just explaining it is fine… I mean, it's not like what I want to really know about, um, your cuteness? Or rather, '***mine***'? Did you just say '***mine***' earlier?"

“I did. So what?” Yuki asked while tilting her head innocently, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Her demeanor had returned to that of the well-mannered, elegant lady Alisa was familiar with, yet the utter nonsense of the entire conversation continued unabated.

“‘So what?’ you say…?” Alisa could only trail off her words, clearly thrown off by the gap between Yuki’s words and behavior. On the other hand, Yuki, speaking as if her bizarre behavior just moments ago had never even happened, continued in her usual ladylike tone.

“…Ah, perhaps you didn’t know this, Alya-san. In ancient Japan, the first-person pronoun ‘boku,’[2] its kanji character literally meaning servant, was used by those of lower status. In contrast, nobles and aristocrats, regardless of gender, used ‘ore’ to refer to themselves.”

“Eh? I-is that so?”

“Yes. Women gradually stopped using it over time, but for old-fashioned families like ours, we still treat it like a gender-neutral way to refer to yourself, used by both men and women.”

“I didn’t know that…”

“Yeah, because it’s not true.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, by the way, I mentioned the word ‘cuteness’ just now, right? Well, if you write it in kanji, it actually originates from the saying ‘being between the rivers: *riverness*.’ Long ago, villagers who lived between rivers would act humble toward those who lived on the east side of the river, while acting all high-and-mighty to those on the west. So from that old anecdote, the word came about to describe those who constantly change their attitude depending on who they’re dealing with.”[3]

“Th-there’s a Japanese phrase like that…?”

“Like hell there is.”

“*Hmmmm*??”

With Yuki piling layer after layer of confusion with no holds barred, Alisa was utterly lost.

Eh, hm? So, 'ore' here's just a normal masculine first-person pronoun? Then, how about cuteness? Was it just, like, actual cuteness, like 'adorable'? So what was cute was… the fact she was acting cute. Wait, that acting was meant to be cute? Huh…?

The subjects and predicates had jumbled up in a scrambled mess, and a world of Japanese unknown to Alisa unfolded before her.

…??

Yet the more she tried to organize her thoughts and make sense of it all, the more confused she became. It was exactly like a tangled ball of yarn—trying to forcefully unravel one part often resulted in the rest being twisted tighter and knotted up even more.

Yeah…

So, Alisa gave up on thinking for the moment and reset her mind. Then, with a terribly blunt and oversimplified conclusion, she summed it all up.

"In other words, Yuki-san, you're cute?"

"Yes, that's right," Yuki declared straight up in English, snapping her fingers and pointing at Alisa as she gracefully sat in her chair.

The mysteriously bold and stereotypical American-like pose[4] that burst forth from her ladylike demeanor caused Alisa's brain to momentarily shut down again. Unfazed by her dazed look, Yuki continued to speak in English, albeit deliberately in a suspiciously broken manner. "I can't stop my cuteness. So my brother will hold me tie wearing bunny suit."[5]

"Wha… What did you just say? I don't really get it; was Masachika-kun the one wearing the bunny suit in the end there?"

"My, my, Alya-san, are you bad at English?"

"No, it's not like that… Wait, you're the one who's bad! You can speak way better English than that—you're aiming to be a diplomat! Or rather, why the sudden switch to English anyway!?"

"*Hahaha*, you funny little girl," Yuki then spoke with perfect English pronunciation.

Having reached this point, Alisa finally realized she was being completely toyed with, and her cheek twitched involuntarily. Just then, a knock echoed from the entrance.

Yuki responded, and in came Ayano, accompanied by Masachika. The moment they stepped into the room, Yuki immediately sprang to her feet, throwing herself into Masachika's arms as she clung onto him.

"And this here's my cute li'l onii-chan,♡" she cooed in a sweet voice as she nuzzled her cheek against Masachika's shoulder.

The sensation that struck Alisa in that moment was nothing short of brain destruction. What was happening in front of her eyes was ***clearly*** nothing more than a bit of playful ***sibling*** affection. In essence, it wasn't anything remotely different from how Maria would often cling to her. Alisa's brain understood that fully well, and yet it refused to accept it as an actual ***fact***.

They're siblings, there's no need to worry about it, her left brain tried convincing her.

Get off him! You're way too close! Her right brain screamed meanwhile.

The two conflicting voices clashed violently inside her head.

Her head's basically breaking down here...!

Alisa trembled all over as she sharply gasped, clenching her teeth. With her brain already completely drained by Yuki's nonsensical remarks and incomprehensible behavior, Alisa was now assaulted by an unfamiliar emotional wave that threatened to send her spiraling into insanity.

Sensing Alisa's barely-contained fury, as if she was on the verge of exploding if agitated any further, Yuki grinned mischievously.

"Ayano! Let's do it!" she called out.

"! Yes!"

At her master's call, Ayano straightened her back with precision and quickly lined up beside Yuki. Then, the two of them crossed on one leg with the other before striking out a flashy, perfectly synchronized pose.

"Written off as the childhood friend, but actually his real li'l sis! Yuki Suou!"

"Written off as the childhood friend, but actually his servant. Ayano Kimishima."

Their dramatic self-introductions, like something out of a Japanese live-action superhero show, left both Masachika and Alisa frozen in place.

And not just them—the entire atmosphere seemed to freeze.

Yet despite all this, Yuki and Ayano—completely unfazed—struck a second coordinated post, this time standing between Alisa and Masachika as if to protect and block off the latter from the former.

""The 'childhood friend(losing heroine)' is a mere guise we wear. Onii-chan/Masachika-sama shall be protected by we—the true sub-heroines!"" The two then declared in perfect sync, albeit with Ayano doing so in a more formal tone that reflected more etiquette.

They nailed it. Absolutely nailed it.

Flawlessly showcasing the results of their practice, the two of them shared a satisfied high-five.

"....."

Swaying slightly, overcome with a wave of dizziness, Alisa's head spun and she staggered half a step. Just then, Yuki suddenly made a startled expression out of realization as she glanced back at her older brother.

"Ah, crap. Forgot we're in the middle of a fight. *Tsk*, don't get all chummy with me. *Bleh*," she said coldly.

"How's that even fair???" Masachika asked, bewildered.

“Just get lost already. Don’t just casually waltz into a girls’ conversation like it ain’t a big deal, scumbag.”

“But you literally answered when I knocked…”

Ignoring her brother’s very reasonable protest, Yuki then began to mercilessly kick at Masachika’s legs, physically forcing him out of the room. Having Ayano leave for good measure as well, she shut the door behind them before turning to face Alisa once again.

By then, Alisa’s mental state had recovered—admittedly only slightly. Holding a hand to her forehead, she looked at Yuki.

“Are you… really Yuki-san?” she asked once again.

“Hey, hey, you really think there’s some other chick out there this perfectly ladylike and beautiful besides yours truly?”

“In what world is *that* perfectly ladylike…?” Alisa quipped, her gaze eyeing Yuki from head to toe.

If she actually were a graceful lady, then this would be outright madness. A proper servant would’ve likely dropped dead from shock if they saw her act like this. But there was no doubt that this was reality now, and it was what Alisa was beginning to realize as numerous parts of her brain that she wasn’t even aware of prior started to throb in pain.

“Um… just… how much of this is the real you, and how much of it was acting…?” She let that question slip before she could even stop it.

Yuki blinked slowly in response, before giving the composed, ladylike smile Alisa had always known so well, completely returning to her usual reserved demeanor.

“But of course, *this* is the real me. That silly behavior earlier was all just an act, you know?”

“R-really…?”

“Yes,” Yuki affirmed politely. “As I mentioned before, all of that was just a character I’d pieced together using manga and anime as references.”

She gave a slight shrug as she explained this, a soft sigh escaping her lips as a mysterious yet delicate aura returned to her presence.

"You know, for me, I really love seeing people smile," she spoke to Alisa with a gentle expression.

Her sudden return to heartfelt honesty prompted Alisa to sit up straight, flustered. Seeing that Alisa was now listening earnestly, Yuki placed a hand over her chest and continued to speak slowly.

"Whenever I see someone else smile, I naturally find myself smiling too. It makes me feel happy… It's why I always want those close to me to always stay smiling."

"…And for that reason, you… um, put on that silly act?"

"*Fufu*. Well, I guess you can say that…" Yuki let out a small chuckle before turning toward the door, which she had just kicked her brother out of, her eyes narrowing affectionately. "Even if it's an exasperated smile, or a tired one, that's all fine. As long as onii-tan[6] keeps smiling… that's all I need."

"Oh…?"

Though the way Yuki carried her tone tugged at Alisa's heartstrings uncomfortably, she couldn't help but swallow her words when faced with Yuki's solemn demeanor.

"…You really do care about Masachika-kun, don't you?" she instead opted to ask.

"Yes. I've told you this before, too, haven't I, Alya-san?"

With that, Yuki gently closed her eyes and spoke as if making a solemn vow.

"I ***really*** love onii-tan."

"I-I see…"

"More than Father, more than Mother. I love onii-tan the most."

"Y-yes, I do remember you saying something like that…"

“There was never a single lie in those words. All I just want is for my beloved onii-tan to smile… That’s why I became the cute li’l sister who doted on him.”

“Onii-***tan***…!?”

At last, unable to hold it in anymore, Alisa forced out the word that had been gnawing away at her sanity ever since earlier, grinding it from the back of her throat. She furrowed her brows, pressing a hand to her now, once again, throbbing forehead.

“Um, sorry to interrupt but… um, Yuki-san? Do you usually call your brother ‘onii-tan’?” she asked.

In response, Yuki blinked innocently and tilted her head in confusion.

“No? Not really,” she declared blankly.

“Then what was all that just now!?” Alisa exclaimed, unable to help but raise her voice.

Yuki pressed a finger to her lips, humming softly in amusement, making a show of being in deep thought before casting Alisa a needlessly sultry side-glance as she replied.

“Because I wanted to see your reaction?”

“Y-you have some real taste in things you find fun, don’t you…?”

“Is that so? Oh my, you’ll make me blush if you praise me *that* much,” Yuki replied with an unbothered smile, unfazed by Alisa’s clear sarcasm, prompting another involuntary twitch from Alisa’s cheek.

Yet at the same time, Alisa couldn’t really help but come to a clear conclusion.

Ah, she really is *Masachika’s sister,* she thought as she mulled over the way Yuki so casually toyed with people.

Like brother, like sister, huh…? No, rather, considering what she said earlier, maybe it was she who influenced Masachika-kun.

That thought naturally occurred to her. It could entirely be plausible that Masachika, who was once supposedly the serious and diligent type, might've turned into the goofy otaku that he was now entirely because of his little sister. As that possibility dawned on her, any lingering sense of caution or hesitation Alisa held toward Yuki vanished all at once.

Then, just as she often did with Masachika, she bared a smile laced with a quiet, burning fury.

"Say, Yuki-san… Do you *actually* intend on having a proper conversation or not?" she asked, clearly ticked off.

"Of course not? The serious part's already done, after all," Yuki said brightly without even the slightest hint of shame, continuing on with a cheerful tone. "Yuki-chan's only got twenty minutes worth of serious talk per day, y'know? One anime episode's worth, in other words~"

"*Gotchaaa~*. So that silly side *is* the real you; the polite one's just all an act, right? Come to think of it, you did imply that earlier, didn't you?" Alisa snapped bluntly, almost sarcastically, letting out a long sigh as she faced Yuki's blatant attitude.

"Yeah, no, I mean… That was actually a joke."

"What *is* your deal…?"

With truth and falsehood so thoroughly entangled, Alisa finally buried her face in her hands. Seeing this, Yuki finally sobered her expression.

"Both the polite version of me and the silly one… They're all equally acts. But equally real," she quietly spoke.

"Acts, but real…?" Alisa, still full of suspicion and expecting even more confusion, asked cautiously.

But this time, Yuki met her gaze head-on, answering her without any trace of her previously displayed mischief.

"Alya-san, when you talk to a teacher, a store clerk, a friend, or family—don't you change your tone and how you act depending on the person?"

"……"

That did make sense. Alisa did often speak more formally with teachers and store clerks, but was more casual with her friends and family. Breaking it down further even shows that her tone among friends shifted depending on how close they were, and even with her own family, her attitude was pretty much different toward her parents than it was toward her older sister.

If you asked her which of those were acts and which of those were her "real" self, then she'd probably only give a vague answer like, "It's not like I'm intentionally putting on an act, and I can't say which is the real 'me' either."

She could understand that much. But even so…

"Then in that case, you don't really need to act that way *now*, do you?" Alisa reasoned.

"Eh?"

"Well… you only talk like that to make Masachika-kun think you're cute, right? If that's that, then you could just talk normally right now."

"Don't go saying something so tactless, Alya-san. Do you still wear teddy bear undies underneath whenever you go out wearing jeans?"

"I'm sorry? Wh-what are you even saying?"

"What I'm getting at is that people being able to see things or not doesn't change the desire to wear something cute. So even if no one's going to see them, wearing cute underwear makes you feel good, amirite?"

"…Well, I suppose so."

"So it's essentially the same thing. I'll act like a cute li'l sister regardless if onii-tan's around or not because it puts me in a good mood," Yuki explained with a smug expression in utter and total confidence. She then spun about on the spot with a twirl, placing her right hand dramatically over her heart as if she were some stage actress before literally singing outright. "Ah! How absolutely adorable I am again today!"

She stood tall, striking a bold, sparkling pose of victory. Alisa could only stare at her back as she raised her finger to her temple.

This is just a case of DID at this point!!! She screamed internally.

This wasn't even a matter of simply adjusting her behavior based on time, place, and occasion anymore—it had gone way past that. If everyone had a two-faced persona at this level and intensity, then Alisa would probably develop immense trust issues. Reasonably so.

DID… That's right, it'd be easier to just think of her as two entirely different people.

Rather than seeing her as the Yuki Suou she knew, it might actually just be better to treat her as someone else altogether—like Yuki Kuze, for example. Masachika's sister, a different person entirely. She could at least spare herself some confusion that way.

Yet as she thought along these lines, another certain realization began to stir.

Could it be that all the teasing… was a form of covering up her embarrassment?

Her brother, too, often fell to the same habit—he'd often automatically deflect with a joke whenever he seemed too serious. Maybe this side of Yuki, too, was just the same. Maybe she was only acting like this because she didn't want to be pitied by Alisa, and that was perhaps because she didn't want her painful past to be treated too seriously.

"*Haaaah*," Alisa let out a weary sigh, gazing straight at Yuki's back as she gave a tired smile. Worn out, but not bitter. "You two really are alike."

At her conclusion, Yuki spun around, blinking several times before smiling faintly while nodding convincingly.

"Yup… We're both *sooo* incredibly *adowable~*"

"*Uuuh?*"

How did I automatically interpret that as "adorable" there? Alisa tilted her head, puzzled.

In that moment, Yuki then suddenly dashed over to the door and flung it open with flair.

“Clack! You think so too, right, *Onii-chaaaaan*~!?”

“I do.”

“Right!? Slam!”

After mimicking the sound of the door opening and closing with her voice, she slammed the door shut before skipping back over with a satisfied nod, as if she’d just proven something.

“In other words, that’s how it is.”

“What…?”

Why did she suddenly need her brother’s agreement? How had she even known that Masachika was still standing just outside the door when none of what they had been talking about could be heard from there? And why, on God’s green Earth, had Masachika instantly and instinctively agreed to a question that made completely no sense at all?

Alisa’s brain was once again flooded with question marks, but above all, what bugged her the most was…

“Wait, could he hear all that from outside?”

It wasn’t like they’d been discussing anything incriminating, but the fact that their entire conversation might have been overheard was unsettling. Alisa glanced nervously at the door, only for Yuki to shake her head.

“Nope? This house has excellent soundproofing,” she told her. “He wouldn’t’ve caught any of it unless we’d shouted.”

“Eh? Then how did Masachika-kun immediately agree with you just now?”

“*Hmm*, I guess you can say it’s that special sibling connection? You know, telepathy. *Fufu~n,*” Yuki puffed up proudly with a smug little chuckle.

Now knowing full well she was Masachika's little sister, Alisa couldn't stop the faint sense of irritation from bubbling up inside of her. Acting on that emotion, she cast a doubtful look in Yuki's direction.

"…Are you sure? He didn't just nod because you asked a question, and went along with it without thinking?"

"Wanna test it if you don't believe me? To see whether or not onii-tan actually understood the question."

"Test it…? How?" Alisa asked as she tilted her head slightly, prompting Yuki, with an almost infuriatingly smug smile, to raise her fingers if she were about to deliver a great truth.

"It's simple," she declared confidently. "I'll just ask again, but just 'You think so too, right, Onii-chan?' and we'll see how he answers. If he's just responding randomly, then he'll probably just say yes or no. But if we really do have that telepathic connection, then he'll respond with something like, 'Think what?", won't he?"

"Well… I suppose that makes sense. If you two really are communicating like that… Yeah."

"Welp, just watch and see."

Still clearly doubtful, Alisa folded her arms in anticipation. On the other hand, with confidence unshaken, Yuki ran back to the door and flung it open once again.

"Clack! You think so too, right, *Onii-chaaaaan*~!?"

"I do."

"I'LL KILL YOU!!!"

"Why!?"

"Slam!"

With that, she stormed back over, and seeing Alisa's beyond-exasperated expression, she gave a solemn little nod.

"See?"

"See what?"

“As expected of my dear onii-tan—he totally gets our flow of comedy.”

“You’re reaching a lot in the most self-serving way possible here, don’t you think?”

“Not at all. It was the perfect comedic response to the deliberate setup I gave him.”

“So then he’ll give you the correct response next time if you do it again, won’t he?”

“*Cough cough*, ah, my cough’s back again. *Cough cough*.”

“What a very convenient case of the flu,” Alisa gave an exasperated jest, sighing with a deadpan look as Yuki mimed coughing into her hand, not even faking it convincingly. “Anyway, I understand. You don’t want people pitying you, but could you please just talk to me normally now?”

She hit the nail on the head, cutting through all the nonsense.

Or so she thought…?

“Hm? What d’you mean?” Yuki replied with such genuine confusion that Alisa froze.

She stared at Yuki’s face, scanning it as if to read her true intentions.

“Aren’t you just mucking about on purpose to blow off the heavy mood?” she asked once again.

“No? I’m legit just messin’ with you because it’s fun, Alya-san. Got a problem with that?” Yuki confessed with sheer boldness, revealing that her intentions were full of nothing but malice.

It made Alisa’s face twitch, and yet, Yuki still met her gaze head-on, wearing a sweet and gentle expression.

“You know, right? About how I just love seeing people smile.”

“Yes, you did say that earlier…”

“But y’know what? I *loooove* seeing people confused or shocked even more♡”

“You’re the worst!” Alisa couldn’t help but shout as Yuki’s angelic smile had morphed into that of a devilish grin in a flash.

But right after, Yuki looked up at her with big, teary eyes and an upward glance, delivering the final blow.

“Even so… we’re still friends, aren’t we?” she asked in a meek voice.

“*Ugh…*”

Despite knowing full well it was all an act, Alisa still hesitated under the weight of Yuki’s masterful manipulation. That look stirred a protective instinct in her before she could stop herself.

No, no, no, don’t let her rope you in again… But, well, she is *my friend, after all… Right?*

No matter how annoyingly calculated that gesture was, it still wasn’t quite enough to destroy their friendship. While Alisa wavered, still trying to rationalize her reaction, Yuki leaned in even closer, eyes shining with mischief.

“I mean, sure, I pretended to be his childhood friend while constantly teasing you, offered you extra spicy foods even though I knew you couldn’t handle the heat, and even trapped you together with onii-tan in that P.E. storage room, but even so, you’ll forgive me, right? You’ll accept me, with those big ol’ F-cups of yours, *riiiight~?*”

“Wha—, *h-huuuuh!?*”

Suddenly confronted with a list of Yuki’s past misdeeds, Alisa was left speechless, her mouth flapping open and shut like a fish out of water.

Then, in a flash, as if lightning had struck her brain, a distant memory struck her.

“I-it was you! So you’re the one who told Masachika-kun my cup size!” she yelled angrily.

“Eh…? *Ahhhh*. Might’ve done that now you mention it.”

“Y-y-you little—! Or rather, how do you even know my cup size in the first place!?”

“Oh, it was back when we went to Prez’s villa over the summer break. I checked your bra size in the changing room. Honestly, I was super shocked. Both you and your sister have huge bras.”

“Wha— …Huh? Wait a minute, but I didn’t even have any underwear in the changing room that day! D-don’t tell me… *you’re* the one who took my underwear and left it in the bedroom!?”

“*Mm-hmm!!!*”

“Y-Y-YOU LITTLE SHIT!”

Another crime revealed, yet Yuki showed absolutely no trace of remorse. Her infuriatingly shameless attitude made Alisa’s arms tremble as she clenched her teeth and growled from the depths of her soul.

“It’s all your fault, it’s all your fault…!” Alisa then began to accuse her of something else.

“Eh? Did something else happen?” Yuki tilted her head with a blank look, but Alisa swallowed her words.

No way she was going to confess the mortifying thing that had happened between her and Masachika after that…

But in the end…

“Oh, and by the way,” Yuki continued her self-incriminating exposé, “the one who made sure you and onii-tan bumped into each other on the stairs once you got out of the bath, Alya-san~? It. Was. Me~♪ *Kyahaha*☆”

“Wha—!?”

Yuki struck a peace sign with her left hand as she rested her chin on her right, clenched into a fist, fully committing to playing the silly cutesy act—something Alisa knew full well she was blatantly doing on purpose.

And at that moment, another memory flashed like lightning through Alisa’s brain. One more humiliating incident involving underwear, this time even involving her sister Maria…

“Wait… don’t tell me… That time when Masha and I were changing into our summer uniforms, and Masachika-kun’s phone went off and woke him up… That was you too!?”

“Huh? I don’t even know when that was.”

“Eh…?”

The two stared at each other in silence for several seconds. Finally, Yuki slowly opened her mouth.

“Woke up Masachika-kun while you were changing? Eh? Alya-san, don’t tell me you were… Right in front of onii-chan…?” she asked, connecting the dots.

“!!” Alisa gasped as she could only squirm in embarrassment.

Complete and utter self-detonation. Alisa’s shame exploded, and what happened after that was something even she didn’t quite understand.

“*Nnnnngghhhh~!!!*”

Before she knew it, Alisa had let out a wailing cry that existed somewhere between a shriek and a groan, dashing toward the door before flinging it open and diving straight into Masachika’s chest.

“W-whoa!?” Masachika yelped out in surprise as Alisa repeatedly pounded her fists against his chest in protest while tearfully glaring up at him with puffed-up cheeks, simultaneously jabbing a finger behind her at Yuki.

“What the hell is with this girl!?” her actions practically screamed, which, oddly enough, looked like a kindergartener tattling on a classmate to a teacher.

“*Nngh~! Nngghhh~!!*” she continued to writhe in frustration.

“O-oh, I see. She’s bullied you, hasn’t she? There, there, poor thing…”

“*Nnnngh~!!*”

“Y-yeah? Wh-why aren’t you saying anything…?”

"*Nngh~! Nngghhh~!!*"

"Ah, 'don't treat me like some child,' right…? Sorry. N-no, really, my bad. For having a sister like that. I guess part of it falls on me for how she's turned out, too…" Masachika said, awkwardly attempting to comfort Alisa as she flailed and writhed in a storm of inarticulate rage and embarrassment.

Then, with a grimace, he turned to cast a reproachful look into the room.

"*Hmmm*, pretty girl…" Yuki spoke in perfect English. "No way you'll cut it out as my sister-in-law if you're already breaking down over something like this…"

Hearing her say something so bewildering as she struck a weird, stereotypical American pose, Masachika swiftly averted his gaze and pretended he saw nothing.

[1]: Same deal as in the prologue.

[2]: No way to localize this here, so here's the different ways to refer to yourself in Japanese again:

私 (watashi わたし, atashi あたし): A neutral and polite way to refer to oneself ("atashi" being the more feminine/softer variant), used in the most formal of settings.

僕 (boku ぼく): Generally used by males in more informal contexts. Is more casual than "watashi" but is still modest.

俺 (ore おれ): Very informal and masculine to refer to oneself. Most commonly used among close friends or in very casual settings. Can come off as rough and arrogant when used inappropriately.

[3]: Here's an explanation of the pun/joke:

Yuki first mentions "かわいらしさ" (kawairashisa), written/spoken in hiragana and literally meaning "cuteness" or "adorableness."

She then makes up an anecdote with the sentence "河の合間で河合らしさ" (kawano aimade kawairashisa), with the "河合らしさ" (kawairashisa) part here literally meaning "riverness," specifically with "河合" literally meaning "river junction" and "らしさ" being the Japanese equivalent to the "-ness" suffix.

The thing is, "河合" (kawai), written in kanji, literally sounds like "かわい" (also kawai, alone meaning cute), hence the pun.

[4]: Japan has this stereotype, mainly coming from TV and media, in which over the top, exaggerated, confident, or theatrical body language is often associated with America.

[5]: Yeah she's literally pronouncing (yes pronouncing in Japanese, not actually speaking in English) this in katakana here: "アイキャントストップマイキュートネス。ソーマイブラザーウィルホールミータイウェアリングバニースーツ."

My guess is she meant "I can't stop my cuteness, so my brother's going to hold me down tied-up while I'm in a bunny suit."

[6]: たん: A more affectionate honorific, going further than "-chan" (ちゃん), used to convey deep affection, thought to originate from/evoke a child's mispronunciation of the latter.

Chapter 2 - Ayano Blends Into the Air

"Have you calmed down now?"

"Yes… Thank you, Ayano-san."

"Not at all."

After the whole commotion, during which she had found her emotions erupting from within her, Alisa had been taken to Ayano's room to stay away from the very source of her turmoil: Yuki. There, she'd sipped on a warm cup of tea, and finally, *finally*, began to calm down.

And as she sat there, worn out from Yuki's strange and indescribable mental manipulation, she found herself reflecting on Yuki once more, finally reaching a single, undeniable conclusion.

Yuki-san's core personality… is still that of an incredibly wicked, mischievous problem child in the end, huh…?

It had been the very first thing Yuki said about herself from when she recounted her past after all. Alisa now experienced firsthand just what that truly meant.

All those weird things she'd said… Sure, maybe there was some deeper meaning behind some of it, but she was basically just having fun with me getting flustered, right…? Surely… she thought as she leaned back deeply into her chair, with her thoughts then drifting again, but this time in a different direction. *Or rather! If that's who she truly is, then just what goes on in that mind of hers whenever she acts like a proper lady at school!?*

Alisa recalled Yuki's reputation at their school: graceful, poised, immaculate. Even Alisa had quietly held a deep admiration for her flawless behavior and elegant bearing all this while—things she, a girl from a middle-class family, could never fully imitate. And it wasn't just admiration either, there had been some envy too, and maybe even a little bit of jealousy.

But when the mask came off… this was what lay underneath.

No, seriously… Just what kind of split personality is that…?

Up until a moment ago, the shock that Alisa felt wasn't something along the lines of, "Wait, so this is what she's like underneath!? Rather, it was more, "S-so someone this chaotic exists, huh…?" And now, somehow, through sheer force of will, she'd managed to accept it with a resigned, "Well, that's just how Yuki *Kuze* is, I guess…"

The problem? Yuki *Kuze* and Yuki *Suou* were one and the same. That was the truth that was still too difficult to swallow.

As Alisa groaned, cradling her head in her hands once again, Ayano wordlessly poured her another cup of tea.

"Just to be safe, allow me to say this," she gently spoke. "Please, I must ask that you absolutely refrain from speaking about Yuki-sama's behavior, or her relationship with Masachika-sama."

"Eh? *Ahhh*, yes, of course… I mean, I doubt anyone would believe me even if I did say something."

"Even so, *especially* when it comes to Masachika-sama, word getting out could be interpreted as some kind of internal dispute within the Suou family. There would be nothing to gain if that information were to be leaked to outside parties."

"I see… Is that how it's like, I wonder…?"

Alisa, too, understood how throughout history, succession disputes among noble or warrior families often spiraled into brutal, bloody conflicts that dragged everyone around them into the fray. Of course, she didn't think that something as extreme as that would happen in modern-day Japan, but rumors circulating regarding infighting within the Suou main family would certainly present an opportunity to those who might try to exploit it for their own gain.

It was simply a world far out of reach from what an ordinary girl could easily imagine. But even so, she could feel the weight behind Ayano's words.

Ah... Alisa suddenly remembered something, and she opened her mouth with a hint of unease creeping into her tone.

"Erm... Ayano-san."

"Yes, what is it?"

"The thing is... Um, I ended up telling Nonoa-san about Masachika-kun trying to return to the Suou family... That was bad, wasn't it?" she confessed, glancing up at Ayano's face apprehensively

As usual, Ayano wore her impassive expression, only tilting her head slightly.

"Was it something that Miyamae-sama specifically asked you about?" Ayano asked a question of her own.

"*Uhhh*... sort of..." she trailed off, shaking her head from side to side. "No, she did ask technically, that's true... But she just mainly sensed that I was troubled and offered an ear. The decision to talk about it... It was ultimately my own."

"...I see."

For just a moment, Ayano's eyes seemed to narrow ever so slightly. Seeing that, Alisa shrank her shoulders.

"I know it was careless looking back. Even though she's a mutual friend, I went and talked about someone else's family matters without permission... I'll apologize to Masachika-kun and Yuki-san later," she blurted out that follow-up quickly, with Ayano closing her eyes for a moment in contemplation, rather than nodding.

“That would be best,” she eventually responded flatly in her usual tone after a short silence.

Still, even that ever-consistent demeanor made Alisa feel oddly reprimanded, and it left her a little uncomfortable.

“*Uhhh*… The tea was really delicious, by the way.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Is there some sort of secret to making it taste so good?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m skilled enough to speak on the subject… Maria-sama is actually better at brewing tea than I am.”

“R-really? I really don’t think that’s the case…”

“No, I still have much to learn.”

“I see…”

Just what was this feeling? The way Ayano had phrased her words somehow made it sound like she was practically asking, “Shouldn’t you be asking your older sister if you’re really that interested in tea?” Was that just Alisa being paranoid?

“Your maid outfit’s really cute, by the way. It suits you well.”

“Thank you very much… Hm? Ah, that’s right—it was the short-sleeved one you last saw, wasn’t it?”

“Right, yes. I remember; the short-sleeved one. I think it was from when I visited Masachika-kun’s house.”

“I see.”

“Yes, but the long sleeves are really cute, too…”

“Thank you very much.”

“……”

And now she couldn’t help but wonder if there was a subtle passive-aggressive “You’re wearing a similar type of outfit, yet you couldn’t even remember?” buried within her own words.

A-as I thought… Ayano-san is actually mad with me, right…?

Alisa snuck a peek at Ayano's face to gauge her mood, but as expected, her expression remained resolutely still, making it practically impossible to tell. On top of that, the stifling silence only made things more awkward.

She had calmed down now, so ideally she wanted to head back to where Masachika and Yuki were. The thing is, they were likely currently in the middle of trying to reconcile after their sibling spat, and that wasn't something she could just barge into and interrupt.

I should give them another twenty… no, thirty minutes alone together at the very least, right?

Alisa understood that much perfectly well, but it also meant she'd be alone with Ayano for at least another twenty more minutes…

"Um…" she started again, trying to scrape together the last of her ability to make small talk. Still, having already faced two failed conversation starters, her spirit was already close to shattering. Even so, she clung to the moment and pressed on. "…You've known Masachika-kun from when he lived in this house, haven't you, Ayano-san?"

"Yes."

"So… what were Masachika-kun and Yuki-san like back then?"

"……"

Ayano lifted her gaze slightly to the upper corner of the room at Alisa's questions, staring blankly into space as if she were thinking it over. After about ten seconds of silence, she finally spoke in a measured tone.

"They were like… the perfect prince and tomboyish princess."

"A-a prince?"

"Yes."

"R-really…?"

It was a shocking way to describe Masachika, and it caught Alisa completely off guard, leaving her at a loss for words.

A prince? A prince?? That guy???

Though she'd just heard from Yuki not too long ago that Masachika had been awfully diligent and serious in his youth, simply not knowing him from back then limited her to only picturing the Masachika *she* knew now; something which, try as she might, absolutely did not line up with the word "prince" at all. What's more, after witnessing that side of Yuki, the term "princess" didn't exactly sit well with her either…

Ayano-san must definitely be romanticizing it pretty heavily. I should probably take what she says with a grain of salt, Alisa thought to herself as she reached that conclusion.

She relaxed slightly, only for Ayano to suddenly speak up again.

"Um…" she started.

"Hm?"

"Regarding what happened after… your birthday party the other day…"

"Yes…?" Alisa answered as she instinctively straightened up a bit tensely, not sure where this was going, all the while Ayano carefully searched for her words.

"How did you, um, manage to… persuade Masachika-sama…?"

"Persuade him…? To go visit Yuki-san, you mean?"

"Yes…"

"*Uhhh*, right…"

As Alisa racked her memory to recall what she had said and done to Masachika at the time, a sudden wave of embarrassment struck her.

N-now that I think about it, it was definitely something that looked straight out of a drama…

She had practically thrown herself at Masachika as he found himself in the depths of his own self-loathing, pleaded through tears and passionate words, took his hand, and dashed forward with him. None of it was something she could simply talk about with a straight face.

Yeah… Let's just… gloss over that, she decided, thinking that saying nothing at all didn't feel right.

So Alisa, cheeks growing noticeably warmer, dropped her gaze as she carefully chose her words.

"*Uhhh*, right… I said something like, 'Let's go see Yuki-san. Put an end to your regrets.' Something along those lines."

"So that's when Masachika-sama made up his mind to return to the Suou manor?"

"Well, I guess?"

"…I see," Ayano responded with her usual blank voice, with Alisa lowering her head even more, partly out of embarrassment, and partly from a lingering sense of guilt.

Which was exactly why she didn't notice at all.

About the kind of expression Ayano was wearing as she listened to her answer.

★·☆·★

I was a hopeless child. A hopeless child who couldn't do anything.

I started attending kindergarten at the age of three, and I was very quickly forced to confront that truth.

"C'mon, Ayano-chan. Don't just stand there! Come this way!"

"Hurry up already! Geez, you're always spacin' out!"

I was unable to keep up with group activities, nor was I able to match the pace of the other kids, or do things the same way they did.

I was hopeless. Even a teacher giving me simple instructions like, “Come here and sit down,” was too much for me.

It wasn’t that I was spacing out. Absolutely not. On the contrary, I was simply overthinking. Overthinking constantly.

Where should I sit?

Wait, shouldn’t I put away my colored pencils first?

But the other kids are leaving their building blocks out—maybe that means we don’t have to clean up?

But what if someone steps on them, falls, and hurts themselves?

That would be dangerous—maybe it’s better to clean up first.

But wait, should I then clean up the colored pencils first, or the blocks?

The pencils were mine, but the blocks were left out by the others. Should I deal with what’s near me first?

But the blocks are the bigger hazard…

Uhh, uhhhhh…

The more I thought, the less I could tell what the “right” answer was.

So there I stood, unable to move.

“*Geeeez~*, Ayano-chan! Can’t you listen to what the teacher says?”

“Ayano-chan, you’re so *sloooow!*”

Stop! Wait! I’m trying to think!!!

Was it really okay to let that cry from my heart out into the open?

Yet, just thinking about that too made my head spin all over again. My thoughts continued to tangle up as they went in circles, my body refusing to move an inch.

I couldn't even take a single step from where I stood until the teacher, having run out of patience by this point, forcibly took my hand and led me away.

"Honestly, you're such a handful… Why can't you even manage something like this?" They reprimanded me in a reproachful tone.

"Man, she's really a slowpoke, isn't she~"

The annoyed looks from everyone around me were terrifying. Being unable to do things like everyone else… It hurt so much.

So I ended up quitting kindergarten altogether.

"Ayano says she doesn't want to go to kindergarten tomorrow either… What do we do…?"

"What do we do? Well, we can't just leave her home alone, can we? Besides, kindergarten is *precisely* the place for her to learn her social skills. If she's already stumbling there, then what will happen to her down the line?"

"But wouldn't it just make her fear it even more if we force her to go when she clearly hates it?"

"Even if you say that, it's not like either of us can take time off work every day. Or are you saying we should leave her with someone else? Just so we're clear, my parents are completely out of the question. Your parents live where they work, too, so they're not an option either, right?"

"About that… The Suou family, whom my parents work for… They apparently have a child the same age as Ayano, who seems to have not started kindergarten yet either. I was thinking that maybe there's something Ayano and their child might click over…"

After much discussion, my parents decided to leave me in the care of my paternal grandparents, who worked at the Suou manor.

I cried initially when I was told that I would be going to my grandparents' place. I thought I was being abandoned because I was a failure of a child.

That's what I believed, so I screamed, cried, and refused.

But after I cried myself to sleep, they put me in the car.

And by the time I woke up, I was already at a huge mansion.

“Welcome, Ayano. This is the home where Grandpa and Grandma work.”

“Welcome, Ayano-chan. We’re going to say our greetings now, so make sure to behave properly, okay?”

My grandparents, who greeted me at work, looked completely different from the ones I normally knew. They wore formal clothes and acted so sharp, looking so incredibly cool to my childish eyes.

While I was completely captivated by how cool they were, they led me to a room…

And there, I met them.

“Let’s get along, shall we?”

“I’m Yuki Suou! Nice to meet you, Ayano-chan!”

They were dazzling, as if the both of them had been born to be the protagonists of a story.

Chika-kun could do anything, and every word and action he made overflowed with pure kindness, like a prince from a fairytale. On the other hand, Yuki-chan was cute, free-spirited, and always sparkling, like a tomboyish little princess.

Calm and action. A prince and princess so strikingly different, yet it was obvious, something you could tell with just a glance, that they deeply cared for one another.

Can such beautiful, precious people truly exist in this world? I found myself thinking.

And at the same time…

I don’t belong here…

It was something I instinctively felt.

Because I was a failure. A child who couldn’t do anything.

And yet, the two of them didn't look at me with those eyes. In fact, despite everything about me, they…

"Will you be my partner from now on, too?"

"You're my very bestest friend, Ayano-chan!"

They treated me as someone important. Despite it being someone like me, they made me their number two.

"Ah!!"

How could I ever put this into words? This overwhelming emotion?

I had felt so proud of myself for the first time in my life… So happy that it hurt.

I wanted to laugh, to cry, to hug them—to fall to my knees before them.

This is where I belong…

It was a thought that came to me naturally, from the deepest recesses of my heart. And from within that tiny, childish heart of mine, a single dream was born.

The dream to remain by these two, closer than anyone else, and to watch over them always.

And the path to realizing that dream? Well, it was already beside me.

"Grandma… I want to serve Chika-kun and Yuki-chan."

Thus began my training as a servant, something that unexpectedly brought about wonderful changes in me, too.

People stopped interfering with me as I blended into the air. That gave me the space to think at my own pace. Grandmother taught me how to set priorities so I could carry out tasks routinely and efficiently, and I became less prone to being stuck overthinking and unable to act, thanks to her.

I could feel myself becoming less of a failure.

But more than that, being able to serve and help those two, even as someone like me, made me so, so happy.

“Thank you, Ayano!”

“Thank you, Ayano-chan!”

Their smiles, their simple words of thanks—all of it became priceless treasures in my heart.

I wish to stay here forever… For the three of us to always be together…

Those were things I wished for, truly from the bottom of my heart…

Yet when the time came for when I most needed to act, I couldn’t move again.

There were so many things I wanted to say—so many things I wanted to convey.

But I simply didn’t know how to put them into words.

And while I kept searching for those words, time slipped away.

In the end, I couldn’t even say a single important thing…

The two of them then went their separate ways.

Masachika-sama left the Suou family, still carrying his heartbreak. Yuki-sama chose to remain, even as her body was confined to a sickbed.

And I simply watched it all unfold.

From a position closer than anyone else, I just watched. Watched as the dream I had cherished crumbled away before my very eyes.

Was there something I… could have done?

I never once thought of myself as their equal. I wasn’t even fit to play the supporting role—just as someone behind the scenes. Not as someone who stood on stage, nor even the person who cheered or heckled from the seats. Just someone quietly watching their brilliance from the wings.

And I thought that was fine. I thought it was the role that suited me.

Yet, because I allowed myself to stay in that spot, all I did was helplessly watch as tragedy played out onstage.

What… should I have done?

That question spun around in my head endlessly, and I kept thinking about the words that might have held both of them together, even though it was already too late…

“Hey, Ayano, will you run in the election with me?”

But I believe it was because of that I took Yuki-sama’s hand back then, making the decision to step on stage.

So that this time, I wouldn’t let tragedy slip by again.

So that this time, I could speak the words that needed to be said, at the moment they needed to be heard.

“Masachika-sama… I understand that you’re avoiding the Suou family. But… could you please visit Yuki-sama?”

“Right now, I think Yuki-sama needs you more than anyone else.”

“I’ll be waiting downstairs for ten minutes.”

This time, I’ll…

…

…

…

The clock signaled that the promised time had passed. Yet, there was no sign of Masachika-sama appearing at the entrance of the apartment at all.

“What should we do, Ayano-san…? Shall we wait a little longer?”

“No… Let’s go.”

“…Understood.”

In the end, no matter how much I moved, the flow of the story didn't change.

"Onii-cha… *Hic*, *uuuu*."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Yuki-sama…"

I was just a stagehand after all. A lucky girl who just happened to be near the prince and princess.

"I… I was unable to bring Masachika-sama with me…!"

Crushed by the helplessness and guilt, I felt my chest caving in. I wanted to disappear from this world entirely.

But then, I heard a knock.

"Masachika-sama…"

"…My bad. I'm late."

Masachika-sama appeared like a savior. Yet, behind him stood… his current partner.

Ah…

There *was* someone who could move the story forward.

It just simply wasn't me—I was only a girl who couldn't do anything.

Someone who could do nothing but just watch.

All I wanted was to remain as the number two to the both of you…

What should I have done?

Chapter 3 - We're Just Cuddlin' in Bed and Talking 'Bout Love; Got a Problem With That?

Let's rewind the clock a little, specifically to when Alisa was being led to Ayano's room.

In Yuki's room, the two siblings faced each other alone. Two days had passed since the angry Yuki had booted Masachika out of her room. This was the first time the siblings had regarded each other since then.

The first to speak was Yuki, sitting on the edge of her bed.

"...So? Have you figured out why I was pissed off yet, my dumbass onii-chan-sama?" she began.

"Are you insulting me or being respectful? Pick one..." Masachika couldn't help but throw a typical retort to his sister's absurd mashup of honorifics.

But even so, Yuki refused to meet his light tone with one of her own, instead opting to narrow her eyes sharply as she glared at him. Masachika could only shrink his head awkwardly at that silent protest, clearly feeling guilty.

"...My bad."

"*Hmph!*" Yuki snorted in annoyance at his apology, propping one elbow on a raised knee as she sat on the bed.

It was a posture that naturally gave Masachika, who was sitting right in front of her, a clear view of her underwear. It was something he had initially intended on ignoring, given the mood of the room and all, but...

"Hey..."

"Hm?"

“What’s with those teddy bear undies?” He couldn’t help but ask in the end.

Yeah… Having a huge teddy bear stare straight at you with its beady little eyes from under a skirt wasn’t exactly easy to let go of.

“Don’t make fun of me.”

“That’s my line!”

“Panties ain’t got nothing to do with any of this right now.”

“Then maybe don’t go showing it off like that if it’s not supposed to be!”

“What, is Jodie here distracting you that much?”

“You’ve named it? That’s disgusting!” Masachika quipped as he gave Yuki a look of half exasperation, half resignation, in response to her idiotic act while still visibly looking ticked off. “Hey, aren’t we meant to be having a serious talk right now?”

“Well, that *was* my intention here, but…” Yuki responded with a hint of solemnness in her expression as she turned her face to the side. “I’ve kinda used up all my seriousness for today… during that conversation with Alya-san earlier.”

“What, like the energy you spend to clear stages in some video game?”

“No seriously, being in serious mode nonstop for that long drained me, man.”

“Yet you had Jodie here tucked between your thighs the entire time, amirite?”

“And what exactly do you mean by ‘having Jodie tucked between my thighs’ here?”

“Shut up! Even I realized how weird that sounded the second I said it!”

“Oh by the way, Mary’s out back too.”

“Out back…? Oh, like on your butt… Wait no, I don’t care,” Masachika jested before letting out a long sigh, looking exasperated while Yuki flopped backwards onto the bed with a thud.

Her momentum naturally tugged her skirt up with a soft flutter, giving a full view of her backside, where a giant shark was boldly printed across her underwear.

“Look, it’s Mary,” she pointed out.

“You didn’t have to show that to me. And wait, Mary’s a shark? The hell kinda aggressive combo is that?”

“Don’tcha think it makes me look stronger?”

“So this is your lucky pair of undies, huh? Wait no, shut up! And fix your damn posture already!” Masachika told her off in a reproachful tone, and Yuki, who’d been chatting while she had her butt stuck straight up in the air in a position that, for a girl, was frankly an utter and complete disaster, rolled forward and began to sit up… only to run out of energy midway as she collapsed and spreadeagled on the bed.

“So, what d’you wanna do?” she asked without a trace of motivation in her voice. “Still wanna have a serious talk right now?”

Anyone else listening to her would have interpreted her tone belonging to someone who was blatantly trying to dodge the matter. But as her brother, Masachika understood perfectly what her words really meant.

Ah… So that’s why she was joking around…

“We can just let it go,” she was practically saying. It was her way of offering to brush everything under the rug, to pretend that their falling out had never happened, to skip the difficult conversation that would have easily dug into their hearts, and just return to being the same ol’ siblings as always.

It was an offer that was, for someone like Masachika—who disliked probing into people’s emotions—honestly really… tempting.

But I can’t just… keep leaning on her kindness like this, he still thought.

His little sister was someone who'd always smiled—someone who had always joked around and silently implied that he didn't need to worry about the Suou family. It was that kindness he had kept depending on time and time again, something that had created the version of who he was now, buried in guilt and self-loathing.

Nothing would ever change if he clung onto that comfort again. That's why he needed to take a step forward now…

"…If you ask me, I'd really like us to talk this through properly," he declared his resolve, prompting Yuki—still lying on her back at this point—to let out a soft "I see," using it as momentum to sit up.

"Welp, guess we're havin' a serious talk then~," she spoke in a light tone, yet her expression was serious.

She adjusted her skirt, crossed her legs, and rested her chin on one hand. It was an action that struck a jolt through Masachika as he gazed into her eyes.

Here stood the real Yuki.

Stripped of all pretense, all calculation. This was Yuki as she truly was.

And from her lips came a reset to their initial conversation.

"So? Have you figured out why I was upset yet?" she asked the very same question again, albeit this time with a more gentle tone.

Masachika shut his eyes for a moment, then looked straight back at his sister as he gave his answer.

"I said… something completely out of line. I ignored your feelings, everything you've built up until now—everything—and ran my mouth. I assumed that, all on my own, you were just some victim of this family. I trampled on your pride."

"That's right… *Mm*, honestly, just thinking about it again pisses me off. What you did."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize. I've still got a lot I want to say."

"...Got it," Masachika nodded solemnly, giving the signal for Yuki to immediately contort her expression after.

"Like what the hell, don't take me so lightly like that—that's what I'm trying to say, you know?" she spat out her words in a rough, heated voice. "Both me, and my responsibilities as heir to the Suou family. It pisses me off that you'd think I can be replaced so easily, and I don't even get why I have to be pitied either. It's just so goddamn insulting."

With a sharpness and lack of any restraint unfathomable from her usual self, Yuki let all her frustrations fly at Masachika.

"Like, I get it, okay? But it's not like I'm underestimating the responsibilities I've got to bear as the heir to the Suou family. *You* used to hold that role after all, didn't you? But that was back then; now it's different. And then you just suddenly waltz in after all this while with this whole, 'I'vE aWaKeNeD tO mY dEsTiNy,' shounen protagonist-ass vibe while I'm sitting here just thinking, 'What the fuck are you on about with that sudden whim? Get real, dumbass.'"

"....."

The words "sudden whim" stabbed deep into Masachika's chest.

And she was right. Until just recently, Masachika had hesitated to even set foot in the Suou manor. And then, after only half a day of doing so, he'd turned around and declared he'd suddenly return.

It was a dramatic change of heart that could only be seen as reckless, impulsive, and thoughtless. No matter how you tried to spin it.

It's not like it was on a whim though—I've known for a long time that it was something I had to do eventually... But yeah, it wasn't until I saw how much my sister was suffering that I finally got off my ass, so it's gonna sound hollow no matter what I say now, right?

Without offering any rebuttal of his own, Masachika simply stayed quiet and took in all his sister's words. Yuki, noticing his silence, gradually let her tone soften.

"Hey, do I really look that pitiful to you?" she murmured.

"No...!"

It was the same question she'd asked two days ago, and Masachika immediately snapped back in denial. Realizing how loud his voice had gotten, he took a deep breath and repeated himself more calmly.

"That's not it. I've never thought of you as pitiful."

It was a question Masachika had also been asking himself ever since she'd cried it out to him. And now, at last, he gave her the answer he'd arrived at, carefully putting it into words.

"It isn't like that… It's just… you used to have dreams; choices. So many things you wanted to become, so many things you wanted to do… I just can't believe that something like becoming the heir to the Suou family is really what you wanted all along… So…" Masachika's face twisted as he confessed, eventually trailing off as the weight in his chest settled in him. Even so, he continued. "So when I look at you now, it's frustrating… And it hurts."

Receiving all of her brother's unfiltered honesty, Yuki looked at him seriously.

"You've said it before, haven't you, onii-chan?" she quietly responded. "That you thought Dad was cool, for choosing to become a diplomat so he could marry Mother."

"…Yeah."

Though the sudden change in topic left Masachika a bit confused, he still nodded along.

"Then what about me? I chose this path with the goal of becoming a diplomat to protect our family's smiles. Don't you feel proud of me for that too?" Yuki then asked him with a faint sadness in her eyes.

It was nothing but an earnest question, and it sent an aching pain stabbing right at Masachika's chest.

"I do… I think you're amazing—more than anyone else," his voice quivering with an expression on the verge of tears. "I truly have nothing but respect for you. But that's precisely why… the fact *I* ended up forcing you to make that choice hurts so much."

"...I see," Yuki gave a small nod and lifted her gaze upward. She stared off into the empty space above, gazing blankly at nothing in particular. Before long, her voice escaped in what sounded like a murmured monologue. "Your will... hasn't changed then, hm?"

"Yeah..."

Yet, Masachika understood perfectly what his sister's vague whisper meant, affirming it.

"I'm going to force you to be free... in order to free myself from this pain. Whether you want it or not. I'm doing this for no one but myself," he said, pausing for a beat before clearly declaring his next words. "I'm going to take the position of heir to the Suou family from you."

Lowering her eyes back down in response, Yuki accepted her brother's unwavering gaze, before closing them once again.

"I wanted to set you free too, onii-chan," she then spoke with a sorrowful smile. It was a confession of Masachika's sister's hidden feelings, and it robbed him of his breath. "I didn't want you to suffer anymore, onii-chan... I just wanted you to finally be free."

It was a wish Yuki had once clung to from her sickbed. Facing the same wish once more, she cast her eyes down with quiet sorrow.

"But yeah... I see... I guess for you right now, onii-chan, staying away from this family's more painful," she came to that conclusion.

What was it that clouded her expression? Was it an unshakable frustration at herself for making her own brother feel that way? Or was it the helplessness that came from them both wanting the same thing for each other, yet still clashing in the end?

If only we'd been born into a normal family... The thought passed through Masachika's chest.

No ties to a prestigious lineage, no crushing expectations, just being part of an ordinary family—like any other.

A family where both of them could choose whatever paths they wanted to follow...

What pointless hope, yet he thought.

Nonetheless, the two could still choose a different path even now if they really wanted to. They could abandon the Suou family as a whole together and run away. But even so, Masachika knew it was a path this sister of his would never ever take, and it was for that reason that he also knew exactly what she was going to say next.

"But even so, there are things I won't give up on either," Yuki declared as she lifted her head, her words accompanied with strong, unwavering eyes.

Yeah, I knew it, Masachika couldn't help but think at her action.

"No one will destroy what I've built up until now—I'll become the head of the Suou family no matter what. And I'll win the elections and become student council president to prove that. I won't lose. Not to you, nii-sama, and not to Alya-san. Never."

It was a dazzling declaration of her determination, full of an unshakable sense of belief and firm resolve. It was a brilliance of the soul that only those like Alisa, who had walked their own path, could shine with.

It really is blinding for someone like me—someone who's just been wandering aimlessly all this time… he thought, sighing as another wave of self-deprecation drowned his heart.

But it was something he didn't let surface on his face. At the very least, determined not to lose in having a commendable attitude, Masachika straightened his back.

"And I'll become a Masachika Suou that I can be proud of. For that, I'll defeat you in the election and join the Raikokai together with Alya," he then declared.

"So you're not backing down either, huh, onii-chan?"

"Yeah, I've decided to walk this path."

"Gotcha…"

“But it was still wrong of me to put down your determination. I’m really sorry for that,” Masachika bowed his head, throwing Yuki off as she looked a little awkward while she cleared her throat.

“Yeah, well… I did kick you too, so let’s call it even,” she replied. “*Mm*… Then, guess this means we’ve made up for now, right?”

“If you’re willing to forgive me…”

“Ah, *geeeez~*. Can you stop with that all meek and humble attitude? You’re makin’ the whole thing super awkward~!” Yuki whined playfully, swinging her arms and clapping her hands together as if to scatter the serious mood. “Okay! We’ve made up! Got it?”

“…Got it.”

“*’Kaaaay~*, fight’s over! *Alriiiiiiight!*”

Standing tall on the bed with her hands on her hips, she then looked down at Masachika with a smug grin plastered all over her face as she proudly lifted her chin with a playful “*Hmph!*”

“Let’s play the ‘I love you’ game,” she proclaimed.

“Why???”

“As a sign of our reconciliation, of course. We’re gonna express our love for each other.”

“The ‘I love you’ game… You mean the one where you stare straight at each other and say ‘I love you,’ ’til the first person who gets embarrassed loses, right?”

“Yup. But we’re changin’ the rules a bit this time: instead of the first one to get embarrassed losing, the one who gets satisfied first loses.”

“Satisfied…? What on Earth d’you mean by that?”

“Just shuddap and do it. C’mon, come here, come here,” Yuki beckoned him over.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Knowing full well that there was no point in resisting once she got like this, Masachika obediently plopped down on the bed beside his sister. After he sat down, leaving a small gap between them, Yuki then turned her whole body toward him and gazed straight into his eyes.

"Onii-chan… I love you," she told him.

"…Oh," Masachika couldn't help but flinch as he heard such genuine affection spoken without her usual joking tone. "Ah, *uhhh*, me too—"

"Look me in the eyes," Yuki reprimanded him, his gaze instinctively wavering as he attempted to return the favor, making him let out a "*Guh*…" unintentionally.

"I love you, Yuki," he managed to say after somehow suppressing his embarrassment.

"I love you too."

"I love you from the bottom of my heart."

"I love you more than anyone else in this world, onii-chan."

"…I love you the most, too."

"*Mufufuuun~*," Yuki giggled.

"Sounds like you're totally satisfied already here," Masachika jested as he gave her a deadpan stare, while Yuki continued to grin from ear to ear as she shook her head from side to side.

"*Nnnope*, not satisfied yet. Keep going."

"That's some biased-ass judgment."

"Onii-chan… I love you more than anyone else, y'know? My sweet, adorable onii-chan," Yuki stated while looking up at Masachika with upturned eyes, ignoring his cold retort.

"…Me too. You're the sweetest, most adorable li'l sister. I love you."

"*Nyufufuuuuuun~*"

"Yeah, that's totally satisfaction right there."

“Nuh-uh, still not satisfied. Haven’t gotten enough love yet.”

“You say that, yet you’re hugging me like this?”

Just how serious is she about this, anyway…? Masachika sighed inwardly, thinking exactly that as Yuki hugged him tightly while she nuzzled her head against him.

“Hey… Just how serious are you about this?” he asked, deciding now was the good chance to ask the question to her directly.

“*Hmm~?* ’Bout what?”

“Like I honestly can’t think of any reason why you’d love me this much…” Masachika finally voiced the question he had in his mind this whole while.

Blinking a few times, Yuki then released her arms and pulled away, her expression fading as she gazed at him in silence.

“I’m… the cold-hearted brother who did nothing but live an aimless lazy life, while you were fighting your illness in this house and working hard to become the heir of this family, aren’t I?” Masachika spoke with care as he met his sister’s eyes. “If anything, I deserve your resentment, not your affection.”

Yuki’s eyes widened slightly as she heard this, before then breaking into a soft smile.

“You’re so annoyingly logical,” she simply said.

“Wha—”

“But if you’re going to put it that way, then I was the little sister who skipped out on studying and lessons while her brother worked at it hard, right? The one who constantly pulled pranks and got in your way? And to top it all off, I hogged all our parents’ attention with my asthma, didn’t I? You’d think *I’d* be resented, not loved.”

“That’s…”

She wasn’t wrong if you just read the facts at face value, yet the truth was Masachika had never once truly resented Yuki.

No, I think she's going too far here. Yeah, there were definitely a few times I found her pretty annoying… Wait actually, more than a few…

But even so, Yuki had always ***only*** been his adorable little sister. Whether she was a mischievous brat, or whether she was bedridden with asthma, geeking out and doing all sorts of silly things, or even acting like a proper young lady, Masachika had always found her unbearably cute. This free-spirited, chaotic, selfish-seeming yet always never-failing-to-be-considerate little sister of his? She was simply someone he had always loved from the bottom of his heart.

"I feel the same way," Yuki commented, giving a clear, radiant smile as if she had read his thoughts like a book. "You're so lazy sometimes, always overthinking everything, constantly stuck in regret and worry, and quick to spiral into depression if I leave you alone. And yet, you're always kind, always letting me lean on you, and you keep loving me no matter what. I love all those sides of you, onii-chan."

With that, Yuki got up on her knees and gently pulled Masachika's head toward her.

"I'll always love you."

A soft sensation pressed against his forehead, followed by a gentle kiss, as she hugged his head tight.

Unlike the playful hugs she had given earlier, this one was entirely different. It was warm and gentle, like a parent trying to convey their love to their child.

So that's it… We've felt the same way all along.

It suddenly all made sense.

The feeling of wanting to cherish a family member beyond what logic allowed—those feelings Yuki held for Masachika were the same as what he felt for her.

Yuki's arms then loosened slightly at that moment, and when Masachika looked up, he found his little sister smiling down at him with her usual gentle expression.

"……"

But then, without a word, Masachika gently pulled her into a hug of his own, just as Yuki had done to him.

"*Yaaaa~,* you're makin' me blush*~,"* Yuki let out an exaggerated squeal, hugging him back, letting out a deeply satisfied giggle as she laid cradled in Masachika's arms. "*Nyufufuuuuuun~*♪"

With that, the two simply basked in the comfort of each other's heartbeat and warmth for a while.

"So whatcha gonna do with this atmosphere? Wanna talk 'bout boobs, or something?"

...That is, until Yuki suddenly blurted an outrageous suggestion in her usual mischievous bratty tone, the peaceful atmosphere shattering in an instant.

"We are not. Why the hell would we?" Masachika retorted.

"No, because like, I really feel like we're headin' for a route split if we leave things like this..."

"A route split? What d'you mean?"

"Like, 'I love my sister...'

▼As a woman

▼As family"[1]

"No way! Okay, it might sound like it, but no way! As family, no question!"

"Is it 'cause my boobs ain't big enough? It's *really* because my boobs aren't big enough, right?"

"Don't force the convo in that direction!"

"But like, you'd have totally already pushed me down by now if I was stacked, right?"

"A li'l sis with big boobs is like the evil eye of some bald, greasy, fat old man."

"*Ggh*, damn, that's actually a pretty good analogy…" Yuki winced as if she'd bitten down on something bitter, unable to help it but commend her brother's perfect analogy about how cursed and psychologically disturbing little sisters with big breasts were.

Pulling away from Masachika, she then placed a hand on her forehead and adopted a pained expression.

"No wait… What if that greasy fat old guy's actually this former hero who's returned from another world, and now, thirty years later, he's unlocked his evil eye to protect his beloved family… I could get into that. Yeah, I could totally get into that!" she spoke with excitement.

"You're *reeeeally* leaning into the power of delusion, aren't ya? That's basically the same thing as staring at your li'l sister's big boobs while desperately tryna convince yourself, 'This here's my favorite gravure idol XX-chan's chest!'"

"*Guh!* But imagining a cool backstory versus covering up the inconvenient parts with fantasised delusions are totally two different things…"

"And yet you can't get excited as-is—they're the same in the end."

"*Ggh, ugh… grrrghhh…!*"

Letting out a strained groan, Yuki curled up on the bed as she pounded her fists into the sheets.

"Why…? I thought any girl with big boobs would automatically be sexy, no matter what…!" she complained in a voice as if she were coughing up blood.

"Counterpoint: Elena-senpai."

"*Gah!*"

"And anyway, even if a girl's stacked, your first reaction's not gonna be, 'whoa, she's sexy,' unless she's wearing something super revealing. You'd normally just think, 'Wow, she's got big boobs,' and that's it," Masachika explained as he flapped his hand from side to side in a disapproving motion, all the while Yuki froze, defeated.

But in the next moment, she straightened as a smug, triumphant look crept across her face.

"*Heh*... oh c'mon, gimme a break... Don't tell me that even *you*, my dear brother, are still stuck at *that* stage?"

"Oh? What's this? Suddenly come back to life, have you?"

With a mocking smile, Yuki lifted her hands as she shook her head from side to side, utterly unfazed by her brother's cold stare. She then lowered her gaze slightly, letting out a soft exhale before brushing her hands in an extravagant motion.

"Sure, I'll admit. Outfits that show a lot of skin—swimsuits, underwear, and the like—they are indeed magnificent... They show the soft, bare skin of a maiden normally unseen. But yet, even then, there's that irresistible and tantalizing allure that comes from the excruciating pain of not being able to see the most important parts underneath. And if she's stacked, all the more so—the way they jiggle with every li'l movement lets your imagination run wild about how soft and firm they must feel in your hands... But, *but*, that being said..." Yuki trailed off, turning slightly to the side as she gave Masachika a smooth sidelong glance with the most aggravatingly annoying game face imaginable. "It's precisely because of that—yes, *precisely* because of that—that there's a unique eroticism to big boobs that are tightly bound beneath stiff clothing like uniforms or suits, far removed from any kind of exposure..."

"...Yeah no, like I said earlier, I don't immediately think it's erotic just by looking at—"

"How can you not think it's erotic!?!?" Yuki then suddenly leaned in with wide blazing eyes, and Masachika instinctively recoiled in both body and spirit.

"Okay, whoa, chill! That energy's terrifying!" he snapped back, prompting Yuki's face to crumple.

"Idiot! You big idiot, onii-chan! You just don't get it!" she continued to shout, this time with a tearful expression.

"Uh, the hell's up with you all a sudden?"

“You’re the one who’s said it before, onii-chan! ‘Showing everything all at once just kills the mood. The art of tease[2] is justice!’” Yuki then brought up an old quote.

“!”

Masachika couldn’t help but gasp sharply, struck by the words he’d once declared to his little sister with confidence, all the while Yuki continued to stare at him with tearful eyes.

“You’re the one… the one who taught me to appreciate the eroticism of what’s hidden, weren’t you, onii-chan?” she cried. “And now, you—*you* of all people—don’t understand it now? The sheer eroticism of keeping things hidden!?”

“*Grgh*…!!”

Her anguished plea struck Masachika to the core. With trembling hands, he could only cover his mouth and lower his gaze, letting his eyes wander in turmoil as he sat in silence.

“Ah, *yeeeah*. You’re right… you’re absolutely right…” he finally then forced out a hoarse whisper from behind those hands.

Murmuring like a man who had just seen the light, Masachika turned to his little sister with a sorrowful expression.

“Sorry… I was wrong.”

“Idiot! Big idiot, onii-chan!”

Yet even as she continued to hurl insults at him, Yuki dove right into his chest and hugged him tightly. Embracing his sister in return, Masachika continued to acknowledge the error in his ways.

“You’re right… Big boobs *are* erotic,” he spoke in a gentle voice. “Even when hidden beneath clothes, they’re still erotic. Just like you said.”

“Exactly! Big boobs forcibly crammed beneath tight clothes! The unnatural wrinkles in the fabric when they’re stretched too tight! The visibly distorted silhouette caused by them! Buttons being tugged on as if they could pop off at any moment! That’s what’s erotic about them! *Uwaaaaaaah~!!!*” Yuki let out a wailing cry, with Masachika hugging her gently, as if he were comforting the child.

And as the two of them embraced tightly…

There watched Alisa, with an incredibly stiff expression plastered on her face.

“*H-heeey*, Ayano-san… Just what exactly have those two been doing over there?”

“They are reaffirming their ***sibling*** bond,” Ayano answered her without hesitation, prompting Alisa to give her a deeply skeptical look.

“*Reallyyy~?*” she asked, recoiling a little after seeing Ayano’s eyes sparkle as if she were gazing upon something so incredibly pure and sacred.

Having had her curiosity aroused through the faint sound of Yuki’s accusations filtered through the door, Alisa had hesitantly peeked inside, seeing all this in an instant. Visually, all it looked like was a tearful reconciliation between a brother and sister, yet what they were going off about was something no better than the typical banter between your average high school boys. The information entering her eyes and ears was so incredibly incongruent that her brain practically glitched. Was she actually just watching one whole meme video?

“……”

Facing the absurdity of the conversation that unraveled in front of her, Alisa cast a glance downward at her own chest, which, in Japan, was unquestionably considered more than ample—a chest that continued to grow to this day. She quietly crossed her arms to cover it, conscious. Ayano on the other hand, someone who was also surprisingly well-endowed despite her petite frame, made no effort to hide hers whatsoever.

“By the way, onii-tan, when are you gonna realize the erotic appeal to tummies?”

“No yeah, I honestly don’t really get that. I mean, tummies aren’t even that different between guys and girls, dontchu think?”

“Say what, you bastard…!? You gonna say the same thing ’bout butts and thighs, huh!?”

“*Hmm*, now that you mention it… Yeah, I guess belly buttons could have some personality to them depending on who it is.”

“*Oho*, so that’s how it is, huh? That’s true, some people even have piercings on them. Guess it could be charming to some.”

“Well, I honestly don’t really get the appeal of belly button piercings either, though…”

“Piercings are somethin’ that *reeeally* come down to personal taste, y’know~. *Hmmm*~, what else can go on a stomach… A lewd crest, maybe?”

“Whoa, you really just went full-on 2D with that one, huh…? Though I honestly don’t get the appeal of that either.”

“*Mm-hmm*. Don’t think lewd crests are all that erotic myself.”

“They’re basically just tattoos at that point, amirite? I mean, I guess, yeah, they’re like piercings in which they really do come down to personal taste. But if you ask me, I don’t love the idea of having words or patterns drawn on otherwise beautiful skin.”

“But you think tally marks[3] are totally erotic, dontchu?”

“That they definitely are.”

“You damn pervert.”

Still hugging each other, the two siblings continued with their weirdly enthusiastic discussion, all the while outside the room, the two innocent girls tilted their heads in unison, puzzled by the unfamiliar term.

“‘Tally marks’…?”

And so, the brother-sister—yet absurdly high school boy sounding—nonsensical banter carried on until Masachika finally noticed Alisa’s presence.

Note: Yuki had actually noticed Alisa peeking in from the very start.

[1]: Meant to resemble a visual novel choice event, if it wasn't already obvious.

[2]: Localized term. For the weirdos, feel free to search "チラリズム" (Chirarizumu).

[3]: 正: the equivalent to 卌; a tally mark. In the context of hentai/porn, it's used to keep track of how many guys have climaxed in a woman. Or to directly quote Ikea, "how many dudes have laid pipe or smthn?"

Chapter 4 - Destroying Alisa's Brain Time and Time Again

"Hey, Yuki, Alya's watching! Alya's watching us!"

"That's fine~, all the more reason to show off… *Heyaaa~*, Treasurer-chan, are ya watchin'~? ***Masachika-kun*** and I are totally hugging in bed right now!"

"Stop saying it so suggestively like that! Let. Go. Of. Me!" Masachika desperately tried to push Yuki away as he bore the front of Alisa's cold stare, yet Yuki's arms stayed tightly locked around his neck, refusing to let go.

"Oh dear, what's the matter, Masachika-kun? You were embracing me so passionately and intensely just a minute ago♡," she cooed, even putting on an exaggerated ladylike tone on top of that as she purred sweetly.

Then, at that moment, Alisa strode up briskly, grabbing the back of Yuki's collar as she yanked her off Masachika.

"Oh my~," Yuki let out a monotone cry as she tumbled backward comically.

Watching her coldly as she rolled away, Alisa turned her gaze back toward Masachika, only to do a triple take when her eyes caught sight of Yuki's exposed backside.

"*Pfft!?*" she couldn't help but gag.

"*Oiii~*, put Mary away here, put Mary away," Masachika called for Yuki to fix her skirt as he quickly shifted his gaze to her from Alisa, who was wearing a rare expression, as if she were about to burst out laughing.

“Ah, oops, sorry ’bout that,” Yuki apologized, still lying there in a gag-manga-like pose, before flipping herself upright, fixing her skirt, and giving Alisa a sharp raised eyebrow. “Hey, hey, pretty girl… What’s with the face? There’s no way you’ll survive in this household if that’s enough to make you laugh.”

“Don’t drag the Suou family’s dignity through the mud. You’re the only weirdo in this household.”

“Exactly! And it’s this weirdo me who, in the solemn air of this manor, sneaks around where Grandfather and Mother can’t see, trying my hardest to make people laugh. I call it: ‘The Absolutely No Laughing Allowed at the Suou Family Home Visit…’”

“You’ve seriously gotta stop that, y’know? And don’t go flashing Jodie behind Grandfather’s back, or something. Seriously.”

“Jodie…?” Alisa inquired curiously.

“Yeah, Jodie,” Yuki reaffirmed as she flipped up her skirt to show off her teddy bear undies with a quick flip of her hand.

“*Pfft!?*”

Alisa, on the verge of bursting out laughing again, slapped a hand over her mouth just in time.

Somehow barely managing to swallow down her laughter, she then stared at Yuki with a gaze of half exasperation and half reluctant admiration.

“You’re really good at hiding your true nature at school, aren’t you…?”

“The masterful act of a wolf in sheep’s clothing, wouldn’tcha say?”

“Right…? Yes, seriously, it’s like you have DID.”

“Oh my, calling it DID is so dearly dreadful…” Yuki’s demeanor, speech, and even her tone of voice flipped in an instant. “Won’t you please call it my ‘ladylike mode’ instead?”

“*Nyaaagh!* My head’s going to explode…” Alisa clutched at her head, letting out a sound Masachika had never heard from her before.

Guessing full-throttle Yuki's too much for the serious-minded Alya, huh? He thought as he climbed down from the bed to approach her.

"Alright, Alya, let's just go to my room for now."

"Oh, then, me too, me too," Yuki draped herself over Masachika from atop the bed, clinging tightly onto him before Alisa could even respond.

“Whoa… No, you’re not coming.”

“No fair, don’t leave me out… *Clingy clingy*,” Masachika’s sister sounded out the onomatopoeia as she put her hands on his shoulders and wrapped her legs around him, deftly climbing onto his body.

“Quit it, quit it,” Masachika braced to keep himself from falling while firing back.

Even so, Yuki paid no mind, continuing to lock her legs around his waist as she squeezed tightly while she clung on to his head.

“*Nooo!* We just made up!” she cried. “I don’t wanna be apart, I don’t wanna be apart!”

“That’s dangero—hey, stop! You’re seriously gonna mess my neck up!”

“*Heyyy*, are you two always like this…?” Alisa’s cheek twitched slightly as she watched Yuki cling onto Masachika while she whined like a kindergartener.

“*Hmm?* Yes, why of course, we’re always—”

“No, we’re not. This is just one of those ‘after the storm comes the—at least it *should* be—calm,’ kinda thing.”

“*Geeez~*, what’s the matter, my dear onii-sama♡. Could it be that you’re embarrassed in front of Alya-san?”

“What’s with you today—*ack!*” Masachika asked before being tugged from behind again.

She’s clingier than usual today, isn’t she? It can’t be just because we made up… Masachika thought, before it then hit him.

He looked upward at Yuki, narrowing his eyes.

“You’re having fun, aren’t you?” he asked, feeling her nuzzling against the top of his head stop abruptly, before continuing. “This is the first time you’ve shown this side of yourself in front of a friend… You’re having fun with that, amirite?”

“…As expected of *my sweetest* onii-chan,” she half spoke in English. “You see through everything, huh?”

Yuki then suddenly hopped down from him, then turned toward Alisa as she gave a slightly apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry, Alya-san," she put on a deliberately serious voice. "This is the first time I've shown this side of myself to someone other than family or Ayano… I got a little bit carried away."

"Ah, s-sure…" Alisa's harsh expression softened, with her then muttering, 【So I'm the first…】under her breath, before turning up her nose with a somewhat smug expression that didn't look exactly displeased. "Well, I guess it can't be helped… if it's your first time."

"*Fufufu*, thank you very much. That's why I really like you, Alya-san."

"R-really? Thanks…"

Hit by Yuki's sudden and straightforward affection, Alisa's eyes widened momentarily before she quickly averted her gaze and fiddled with her hair.

It was painfully obvious to anyone that it was her way of hiding her embarrassment.

Way too easy… The siblings's thoughts overlapped perfectly despite not meaning to.

"Now then," Yuki raised her hands with a smile. "How 'bout a make-up hug? C'mon now~, not a shred of ulterior motives here on my end, m'kay?"

"Don't say that with those dirty old man eyes," Masachika retorted as he grabbed the collar of Yuki's shirt, stopping her in her tracks as she had started to dash forward, squeezing her palms with a grabbing motion at shoulder height.

It was only a few moments later did Alisa also seem to catch on to what was about to happen, quickly crossing her arms over her chest as she took a step back.

"Y-you really are… Or rather, why are you so obsessed with breasts anyway?" she asked. "Y-you have them too, you know?"

"*Hmph*… What an innocent little baby," Yuki, still caught by the scruff of her neck, heaved an exasperated sigh, looking thoroughly annoyed. "Listen up, will ya? There are four kinds of boobs in this world. Ones you can't grope, ones you can softly grope, ones you can firmly grab at, and… ones you can sandwich *things* with."

"Is that really something to say with a smug face?"

"I've got boobs you can grope," Yuki placed a hand on her own chest as she continued, completely ignoring her brother's cold retort. "Ayano's are boobs you can grab at. And yours, Alya-san… are just about ready for sandwiching."

"W-what are you even talking about?" Alisa asked, flustered.

"Oh? Why, of course, I mean di—"

"Packing time."

Without even an ounce of hesitation, Masachika tossed his sister onto the bed, before proceeding to roll her up in the comforter like a burrito, topping it all off by plopping a pillow over her face. Ignoring the muffled "*mgeh*" that came from beneath it, he then turned to Alisa and gestured toward the door.

"Alright, let's go," he said. "Staying with her for any longer's just gonna wear you out."

"Says the guy who's tryna lure a girl into his room under the guise of some half-assed reasoning… Hey, ain't that *gonna be more exhausting, don'tcha thiiink~?"* out came Yuki's muffled voice as she shifted the conversation back to the previous topic. *"Like, all that thrusting's really gonna wear you out, won't iiiit~?"*

"Yeah, just ignore that."

Completely disregarding the muffled voice that came out from under the pillow, Masachika gently ushered Alisa toward the door. He then turned to Ayano, who'd been standing quietly by the door, just before leaving and spoke in a low voice.

"She's way too lively for someone who's just recovered. Keep an eye on her and make sure she rests, okay?" he whispered.

“Very well,” Ayano spoke, reciprocating his quiet tone.

“Hm? Ayano?”

Though Ayano had nodded in understanding as usual, there was something about her that made Masachika pause. He looked at her face more closely as if trying to gauge what it was.

“Is something the matter?” Yet she asked, still in a quiet tone as she tilted her head, her usual blank expression unchanging.

“No… Counting on you,” he resigned in the end.

“Yes.”

Still wondering if it was just his imagination, Masachika followed Alisa out of the room.

Even as he kept contemplating Ayano’s odd vibe, he led the way to what used to be his own bedroom. Opening the door, he gestured her inside.

“Please, come on in…. Though, I’m not really sure if I should be calling this my room anymore.”

“Pardon my intrusion…”

Following Alisa, who’d stepped into the room a little hesitantly, Masachika closed the door behind them.

Alisa then began to slowly look around the room, which looked as if it were frozen in time from several years ago, her mind already distant from the chaotic scene that happened earlier.

“So this is where you grew up,” she said with a thoughtful murmur.

“*Mm-hmm*. I was surprised it’s been left exactly as it was too.”

“…Can I look around?”

“Go ahead.”

Receiving Masachika’s permission, Alisa stepped up to a bookshelf and pulled out a nearby book, flipping through its pages, her brows slowly furrowing.

“You were already reading this in elementary?” she asked.

“Hm? Lemme see, lemme see… *Ahhh*, yep, I vaguely remember that. Welp, I honestly don’t think I fully understood it back then, though,” Masachika glanced nostalgically at the book on modern history and global affairs that Alisa held, letting out a small chuckle.

“I see… It’s somehow… finally starting to feel real.”

“Hm? What is?” Masachika asked as he lifted his gaze, meeting Alisa’s eyes as her lips softly curved into a smile.

“That you really were Masachika Suou once…” she spoke in a gentle voice as she gestured around the room. “That you worked hard here to become the heir of the Suou family… All of it… it’s finally starting to feel real to me now. *Mm*, I finally understand it.”

“……”

Perhaps Alisa was picturing the young Masachika, diligently studying with his small frame, right now.

Unsure of how to respond, all Masachika could do was give a vague nod.

“You too… You worked hard too, didn’t you?” Alisa then quietly murmured.

“Hm?”

“Ah, no. It’s just… I’ve always thought you were the kind of person who could do anything without ever having to try,” Alisa spoke somewhat awkwardly, caught by Masachika’s questioning gaze, before gazing at the rows of thick books that filled the shelves. “But you’ve been working hard since you were little, haven’t you? Probably even harder than me… Thinking about it… like that now… *Mm*, I just feel, I don’t know, sorry for having misunderstood you.”

“……”

It was something Masachika had never considered before, and he couldn’t immediately make sense of it. But as Alisa gently brushed her hand along the spines of the books, she continued with a warm voice.

“Every single one of these books… Each and every one of them represent the little bits of effort you’ve stacked up… And those efforts are what have shaped the person you are today… Realizing that makes me happy.”

“……”

Those unexpected words left Masachika frozen in place.

Effort. Something he’d always thought of as antithetical to himself.

For all his life, Masachika had truly believed he’d only gotten by because of the talents he’d inherited from his parents alone. That was what he had always convinced himself of.

But now…

Masachika Suou’s efforts…

When he thought about it, there certainly were things that came to mind.

Now that I think about it… I got into Seirei Academy because I had studied so insanely hard when I used to live here, didn’t I…?

Even with Masachika’s exceptional learning ability, there was just no way someone would be able to pass the entrance exams at one of the most difficult junior high schools to get into in Japan with just six months of prep alone. It was no doubt because he’d already been studying with the intention of entering Seirei Academy from when he used to live in this house that he’d been able to do it.

The social skills I’ve gained here, the ability to approach anyone, the way I carry myself to make sure others don’t feel uncomfortable…

Despite the handicap of coming from a middle-class household—at least in the eyes of everyone else—he’d been able to hold his own ground against the sons and daughters of all the upper class hotshots at Seirei Academy, all thanks to those skills.

And even my capabilities as a pianist…

For Masachika, the piano was undoubtedly the centerpiece of his joyful days with his mother, yet it was the very same thing that had triggered the breakdown of their relationship.

It symbolized both his love and hatred for her.

And yet, that very ability was now helping him in the student council election.

The reason why he'd been able to both thwart Yuusho's schemes and win Elena over was because Masachika Suou was someone who'd worked so incredibly hard to hone his skills as a pianist.

Ah, that's it…

He didn't have to deny the days he'd lived as Masachika Kuze,

He didn't have to think of them as mistakes.

That was something Alisa had taught him three days ago. And now again, Alisa was teaching him the same truth, but this time about Masachika Suou.

The days he'd spent earnestly devoting himself to becoming the heir to the Suou family, the days of wanting to live up to his grandfather's expectations, and the days of wanting to be praised by his mother…. They were all days he'd thrown away, losing sight of their value and telling himself that they were worthless.

Yet… Alya just accepted them.

Just that. Just that alone made him feel as though all those days had finally been rewarded—it allowed him to believe that they hadn't been meaningless after all.

"……"

Before he realized it, tears had begun to spill from Masachika's eyes.

"Eh, wh-what's wrong?" Alisa gently called out to him concerned as her eyes widened in alarm.

Yet even Masachika wasn't sure of what these tears meant.

Maybe… Maybe these were the tears of Masachika Suou himself.

Ah… Now I can…

Finally accept the boy he once was.

The boy who'd sought after his mother's praise.

The boy he had denied and cast aside along with her as she let him down.

The boy who had desperately clung to something so worthless and had been dismissed as a fool.

The pure and innocent Masachika Suou whom he had scorned and pushed away.

"Are you okay…?" Alisa asked as she gently touched Masachika's cheek with a worried look in her eyes, the coolness of her hand making him realize just how hot his face had become.

"Ah, no, I'm fi—" he tried to say with his usual smile in an attempt to brush it off casually.

Yet for some reason, he couldn't finish his sentence.

Huh… I guess I was never really okay in the first place… He finally realized.

"I… y'know…"

"Hm?"

"I…" Masachika's throat trembled as he whispered, prompted softly by Alisa's gentle voice and the clumsy yet comforting touch of her hand. "I… I really was trying so hard…"

"…I know."

"Because all I wanted was for Mom… to praise me… so I kept trying so hard…!" he forced those words out from the depths of his soul, gasping as tears welled up one after another.

But with each word, he felt the weight he'd been carrying in his chest gradually getting lighter and lighter.

Masachika slowly closed his eyes, all the while Alisa continued to gently stroke his cheek.

★·☆·★

"...Feeling better now?"

"Yeah."

Though Masachika didn't know how much time had passed, there was no denying that his heart had felt surprisingly calm now that his tears had finally stopped.

It's strange... I already don't feel any pain from being here anymore.

The unpleasant feeling of having his most bitter memories buried deep within his chest being prodded at—that oppressive sensation that had always haunted him every time he was here—was completely erased now.

And all of that, every bit of it, was thanks to the girl by his side.

Keeping that in mind, Masachika took her hand, which was still resting against his cheek, and lowered his head to press his forehead against the back of it, sinking to his knees.

"Eh, M-Masachika-kun!?"

"Thank you, Alya. Your words... saved both who I am now and who I once was," he spoke sincerely, still holding her hand in his own as he looked up at her flustered face. "You gave me the push I needed to move forward after standing still for so long. I can truly never thank you enough."

Alisa's eyes widened at his heartfelt words, before she then averted her gaze, slightly embarrassed.

【That face... it's just not fair...】she murmured.

"Huh?"

“I-it’s alright! Geez, it’s embarrassing, so hurry and stand up already!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Masachika let out a wry chuckle and stood up as he heard her cry out like she couldn’t take it anymore. “But, what I said earlier really was from the heart, okay…? I’m grateful to you, Alya.”

“Ah, yeah… Well, I’ve got my own things to thank you for too, so we’re even,” she said in a blunt tone, continuing in a soft mutter.【Because of you… my world got bigger too…】

“Gotcha… Well, let’s just go with that, then,” Masachika gave a gentle nod to his partner, who was pouting in embarrassment. Then, wiping away the traces of his tears with a swipe, he shifted his tone to something lighter. “Anyway, now that I’ve told you everything, Alya, maybe I should explain the whole thing to the others you invited to your birthday too.”

“Eh…? Ah, now that you mention it, both Nonoa-san and Sayaka-san already knew about your true relationship with Yuki-san, didn’t they?”

“Oh? Who told you that?”

“Nonoa-san did. And also… sorry.”

“Hm? What’s up?” Masachika asked, caught off by Alisa suddenly lowering her head.

“Nonoa-san… had asked if it was really okay for me and you to come here yesterday,” Alisa spoke apologetically soon after. “And at that moment, I… I kind of ended up telling her that you were thinking of returning to the Suou family.”

“Oh, *ohhh?* I… getcha. Well, she’s not the type to go spreading rumors or anything, so it’s fine if it’s her, really…” Masachika explained as he roughly pieced together the situation in his mind, guessing that Nonoa—who knew about his circumstances—must’ve been worried and had asked out of concern.

Hm? That *girl being worried ’bout someone…?* Yet he reconsidered immediately, unable to help but feel a sense of unease as it flickered through his mind for a moment.

Maybe it wasn’t so much worry but just curiosity? He then thought, letting it go in the end.

Even so, despite receiving Masachika’s forgiveness, Alisa’s expression still did not brighten.

“That’s true, but… I had also thought you might’ve told Nonoa-san and Sayaka-san about your secret before me,” she confessed. “And that frustration sort of pushed a part of me to end up blurting out your circumstances… So, I’m sorry.”

“Ah, so that’s what it was…” Masachika gave a small nod as he finally realized the true nature of Alisa’s guilt. “No, you’re completely right to feel that way, and really, don’t worry ’bout it… Yeah, it’s no wonder you’d felt that way. Oh, but just so y’know, it’s actually because Nonoa had known me from before. I didn’t remember it either, but we had apparently met at some piano recital.”

“Ah, so it was like that.”

“Yep. And because the Suou surname’s pretty recognizable, and also something vague ’bout… how my eyes looked similar to Yuki’s, or something? She figured it out. As for Sayaka, she found out from Nonoa.”

“So that’s how it happened, huh? I’m sorry, I…”

“No, really, that’s enough already,” Masachika gently stopped her as Alisa tried to bow her head again.

Huh? Feels like I’m forgettin’ something here… That faint thought echoed through the back of his head at the same time, but nonetheless, he steered the conversation back on track.

“So anyway, I was thinking that maybe it’s all good to tell the rest that Yuki and I are siblings. They’re all not the type to go blabbing about it, anyway either… I’ll still need to talk to Yuki about it first, of course.”

“That’s right… As long as you’re okay with it, then I think it’s fine too,” Alisa said, tilting her head slightly. “But in that case, Yuki-san would… um…”

“Nah, I don’t think she’d reveal her true nature, y’know?” Masachika waved his hand from side to side as Alisa trailed off, sensing what she was about to say. “I think we’ll just tell them we’re siblings, nothing more…”

“Ah, right. Of course…”

“Anyway, since we’re on the subject, were you good earlier? I mean, I can totally imagine Yuki teasing you a ton…” Masachika asked with concern, recalling how Alisa had pounded against his chest with those puffed up cheeks of hers, earning a soft, resigned smile from her.

Yeaaah… She's reached the point where she's stopped trying to think 'bout it, huh? He thought, about to nod in understanding, confident in his deduction.

That was, if it weren't for Alisa grabbing at his collar tightly all of a sudden.

"What on Earth was that!? Seriously, *what* was that!?" she exclaimed right in his face.

"Ah, so she still hasn't processed it, has she…? No yeah, seriously, 'what was that,' huh?" Masachika talked to himself without an attempt to resist, even as Alisa shook him back and forth with an almost demonic intensity, perfectly understanding how she felt.

"That girl… I hate to say it like this, but she's not right in the head, is she!?" she asked desperately.

"*Hmm*~, yep. Can't really argue with that."

In fact, Masachika himself had lost count of how many times the very words, "This girl's insane," came to mind whenever Yuki was in her li'l sister mode. For Alisa, someone who'd only ever known the refined ladylike version of her, the contrast must've been even more shocking.

Understanding that fully well, Masachika simply accepted Alisa's storm of emotion. Then, as she finally stopped shaking him and instead began to breathe heavily in frustration, he raised both his hands.

"Oh well~, if there's one thing I can say… it's this: trying to have a normal convo when Yuki's in that state of hers is completely pointless," he spoke. "She's basically just running on vibes and momentum without using her brain at all whenever she's goofing off at full throttle. You're just wasting all your effort if you try to make sense of something she didn't even think through in the first place."

"Then what am I supposed to do…?"

"Return the favor by being on the same kinda wavelength. That's… probably impossible for you, though. So just get used to it, I guess."

"I don't want to be exposed enough to that side of hers to the point where I'd actually start to get used to it."

“It’s fine, it’s fine. You’ve gotten better at handling *my* jokin’ about now, amirite? You’ve got this, you’ve got this.”

“Easy for you to say… Wait, so you were aware you’ve been leading me by the nose this whole time?”

“*Ugh*… well, yeah,” Masachika averted his gaze with a slight wince as Alisa glared up at him sharply, before then letting out a small huff through her nose as she finally released his collar.

Seeing his now wrinkled uniform shirt and disheveled tie, she let out a soft sigh and pursed her lip slightly as she began to straighten them out.

“Well… sorry for taking my frustration out on you.”

“No, it’s fine, I get it. It’s hard to direct all that anger toward someone that small and fresh out of sickness. And like I said earlier, part of why she’s like this now is because of me too…”

“Right… How do I tie this, by the way? It keeps ending up kind of lopsided.”

“Hol’ up, you were doing it without knowing how?”

“It can’t be helped! I’ve never tied a necktie before…”

“*Geh*, th-then you don’t gotta force yourself to fix it…”

“Giving up halfway through isn’t my style!”

“Even if you say that, *I* can’t even tell how it looks like right now without a mirror,” Masachika snapped back.

No matter how far down he lowered his face, Masachika couldn’t even catch the barest of glimpses at the knot being tied at his neck. Instead, what he could see was Alisa’s beautiful face as she locked herself in a fierce battle with his tie, and her flawless, porcelain skin, with her jewel-like eyes framed by her long eyelashes. As Masachika stared at her so intensely, he suddenly remembered how he’d practically broken down in tears in front of this very girl—having utterly bawled his eyes out—and an overwhelming wave of embarrassment hit him.

Ugh. Uuughhh… What a blunder…

On top of that, he was being fussed over by her like this right now—having his tie fixed made him feel like a little kid all over again. Masachika couldn't help but turn his face away.

"*Mm*, alright… How's that?" Alisa let go of his tie just then at the same moment, quickly looking up at his face.

Seeing him awkwardly turn away, as if to hide something, Alisa couldn't help but blink a few times in confusion… before gasping as she hastily shielded her chest, pulling back.

Sensing that he was being wrongly accused of something utterly outrageous, Masachika hurriedly raised his voice.

"No, hol' on a sec! Aren't you misunderstanding something here!?"

"Misunderstanding…?"

"I didn't look. I seriously didn't look."

"At what?" Alisa purposely feigned ignorance.

"Y-you know… um, your chest."

"Then why were you turning away all awkward and embarrassed?"

"That's…" Masachika started, quickly finding himself at a loss for words, cornered with wanting to protect his pride as a man, all the while Alisa's gaze grew steadily colder.

"You're the absolute worst. So you *were* looking at me like that, weren't you?" she spat out in disgust.

"No, that's probably another misunderstanding too! About earlier with Yuki, y'know, about the whole big boobs thing? You probably heard that, right? I was just playing along with her! Exactly, that's it! I was going with the flow, like I told you—matching her wavelength, nothing more!"

"So in other words, you're saying you do think I have big breasts, right?"

“That’s… because, well… you *are* big, actually…” Masachika trailed off, realizing that he was only going to dig himself deeper into a bigger hole—treading the waters of straight up sexual harassment—no matter what he said.

He averted his gaze in defeat.

“No, but seriously, I wasn’t looking at you with those kinds of thoughts…” he then attempted to explain himself again. “I mean, and even just now, I wasn’t really looking at your chest at all…”

“Ah, right, that’s it. You don’t think it’s erotic unless someone’s wearing revealing clothes, don’t you, Masachika-kun?”

“No, yeah, well… Yes…” Masachika averted his eyes further, mumbling his answer under his breath.

And immediately with that, Alisa’s expression suddenly changed out of his line of sight.

“*Hmmm~?♪*” she hummed.

Gone was her cold, scornful look, replaced instead by a playful and sadistic smile, resembling that of someone who’d found the perfect target to tease. The expression was remarkably similar to the one Yuki had worn earlier as she was secretly messing with Alisa, but she was—of course—completely unaware of the fact herself as she slowly approached Masachika.

“So in other words… what you’re saying is you’d thought of something erotic from the time I *was* in my swimsuit, didn’t you?” she teased with sadistic pleasure.

“…No comment.”

“Admission by silence is a thing, you know~?”

“…No comment.”

“Oh, *riiight*… Now that I think about it, you were really focused on my chest too when I wore that dress to our little cultural festival afterparty, weren’t you? Were you thinking of something erotic then as well?”

“How long is this going to continue?”

“Until you come clean about *everything*.”

“Why’re you suddenly trying to force a confession out of me!?”

“Because having your partner always look at you in such a lewd way is discomforting, isn’t it?” Alisa continued with her tone, which by this point had lost any trace of her previously held contempt, now replaced instead by a lively, mischievous bounce.

Masachika finally picked up on it, furrowing his brows as he looked back at her.

“No, like I said before, I don’t *always* look at you like that. Really,” he emphasized his innocence firmly, genuinely telling nothing but the truth on this point.

And yet, contrary to his expectations, Alisa didn’t look the least disheartened. She instead narrowed her eyes, eyes that shone with a teasing glint, and lifted her chin slightly.

“*Hmmmm~?* But you’re always sneaking glances at my chest from what I’ve seen. Isn’t that so?”

“That’s… just a guy thing…”

“*Reeeeally~?* So those glances aren’t in any way lewd, *hmmm~?*”

“Obviously not.”

“Oh, is that so~?” she asked in a voice that carried no sign of believing him at all.

Folding her arms firmly beneath her chest, she then lifted her shoulders in an exaggerated shrug, causing her ample bust to bounce up and down with impressive prominence.

“……”

“I feel like your eyes just widened for a second there, didn’t they?”

“Th-that’s so unfair.”

“What is? You said it yourself—you don’t look at me that way as long as I’m not in anything revealing, do you~?”

“You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you? Also, my eyes widened because I was surprised; it’s not like I was looking at you in a pervy way or anything,” Masachika deliberately put on a tired expression as he spoke, letting out a deep sigh. “Or rather, why d’you suddenly go on the offensive like that sometimes?”

“Go on the offensive?”

“Exactly, um… like, y’know, during the festival afterparty. Like that.”

“Like *that*?”

“Exactly… No, you know exactly what I mean!” Masachika couldn’t help but raise his voice, unable to stand her overly innocent act anymore.

In response, Alisa tilted her head with a mildly puzzled look, then leaned forward slightly—her left arm still folded beneath her chest—and undid the third button of her shirt and tugged it open with her right hand.

“…You mean *this*?” she teased.

“You little—!?” was what Masachika could only get out as his gaze involuntarily crept to her perfectly shaped cleavage revealed from the gap in her shirt, formed by her ample breasts pressing tightly together, accompanied by a glimpse of her pale blue underwear that peeked through.

“Oh my, your excitement really flashed in your eyes there, didn’t it?”

Hearing her voice, amused beyond measure, Masachika snapped back to himself, forcibly tearing his gaze away with all the rationality he could muster.

“S-see, like *that*! Why d’you suddenly do stuff like that!?” He then let out a strangled cry.

“Because your reaction’s just so entertaining?”

“H-hey now… You’re seriously putting your whole body on the line here…” Masachika reasoned, gritting his teeth in frustration at how easily he’d been thrown off, before scratching his head roughly with both hands as he continued to squeeze out his words. “More importantly, you really gotta stop doing that kinda thing to guys…!”

“Why?”

“Because then you’ve got no right to complain no matter what they’ll do to you then!” He spat those words right at her, glaring sharply.

Still, Alisa remained unfazed. Folding her arms again, she gave an exaggerated shrug, as if genuinely puzzled.

“Oh? So you *do* wanna touch them?” she asked.

“!?”

“I totally don’t mind, you know? If you want to touch them, that is,” she pressed her arms upward from below her chest with that declaration, widening the opening in her shirt even more as she let that dangerously alluring cleavage of hers to peek out even more. “But only… if you say it clearly. That you want to, m’kay?”

Alisa’s relentless attempts to tease Masachika with a provocative, enchanting smile did not seem to stop.

It was a sight that defied reality, plain and simple. In front of him was the same Alisa he’d been so used to seeing in her school uniform, and yet now, from beneath that red ribbon she wore, those mesmerizing, ample curves of hers peeked out in a way completely at odds with her usual image. Masachika’s mind froze.

And to that frozen brain, Alisa softly slipped in a few teasing Russian words, tinged with just the faintest hint of embarrassment.

【Wanna check… if they’ll sandwich it?】

Those explosive words sent Masachika’s mind boiling over all at once, and he couldn’t help but squirm on the spot.

Hol’ on! There ain’t no way you’ve got any idea ’bout what *you’re meant to shove in there, d’you!?* He screamed at the top of his lungs inwardly.

Given Yuki had been talking about “groping” and “grabbing at,” what was most likely the case was that Alisa had probably thought that the whole “sandwiching” was still in reference to hands or something equally, quote-on-quote, innocent.

Like hell I could do anything like that to such a pure and innocent girl! A voice of reason rang out in Masachika’s mind as he realized this, clenching his fists tight to the point of digging his nails into his palms.

“*Nrggh… grhh…!*” he let out a painful groan, dropping his gaze to the floor as though weighed down by agony. Then, in a voice that sounded as if he were choking on coughed-up blood, he made his declaration. “I… want to touch them, but I won’t…! Because I’m a gentleman…!”

Faced with his tormented expression that would make anyone wonder if he was about to commit seppuku right on the spot, Alisa blinked rapidly for a moment before suddenly breaking out into a laugh.

“Oh my, is that *soooo~*? I’m not sure if the word ‘gentleman’ applies at all when you look *that* desperate.”

“…The fact I’m suppressing my desires makes me a gentleman.”

“*Fufu*, that’s true… You *reeeally* are a gentleman,” Alisa admitted, albeit still in a teasing tone.

“Okay… Um, would you please button up your shirt already now?” Masachika, still staring down at the floor, begged.

“*Hmm~?*” Alisa leaned forward to peer into his face despite his protests, her lips curving into a sly grin as she spoke. “Then, how about this… Since I fixed your tie, why don’t you fasten it up for me? My button.”

“Wh-wha!?”

“A true gentleman should be able to button up a lady’s shirt with perfect composure, shouldn’t he?” She then straightened up with those teasing words, folding her hands behind her back as if to declare that she had no intention of doing it herself.

Masachika was left speechless by her posture that all but dared him to go ahead.

Huh, seriously!? He stared at Alisa's face, utterly dumbfounded, but she only smiled playfully, clearly enjoying every second of his turmoil. *No way, that's too much!! The hell is wrong with you!? Like hey, where the fuck is your usual clean-freak self!? Did something Yuki say get to you, or what!?*

Could this have been inspired by some sort of rivalry against Yuki, who'd been shamelessly clinging onto him earlier?

Still, even if that were the case, this was simply going way too far.

And then, just as he got that far in his thoughts, a sudden realization struck Masachika.

No, it's not because of some rivalry… It's maybe more like… venting? Like payback for how Yuki messed with her.

Alisa had been completely toyed with by Yuki with no holds barred, treated like a plaything. So now, here she was subconsciously taking out that frustration on him.

And now that Masachika thought of it, Alisa had murmured about how her head was going to explode earlier when they were Yuki too.

I get it now… She's just teasing me as an outlet for being teased herself.

Finally understanding that, and with that realization bringing about a certain calmness in him, Masachika gently placed both hands on Alisa's shoulders, his expression softening with pity.

"You're tired, Alya…" he spoke gently to her.

"…What's with the sudden 'I'm a doctor at a hospital' tone of voice?" Alisa's turn to quip came, looking slightly exasperated by Masachika suddenly switching roles from gentleman to physician.

Even so, all Masachika did was just shake his head slowly, his eyes filled with sorrow.

"Nah, it's fine. I understand, I really do."

“What’s with that creepy way of talking…” Alisa gave him a deadpan glare before finally unclasping her hands from behind her back, raising them to her chest. “Anyway, just hurry and button me up, okay? I’m a girl, I need to keep warm.”

Masachika, relieved that she seemed to have finally returned to normal for the most part, felt the tension in his shoulders ease—but only for a moment… Because then, Alisa returned to a sharp grin.

“Because if you don’t… there’ll be more for you to deal with, you know?” she added, her hand then moving to the second button of her shirt, which had already been strained from the pressure of what lied underneath, looking as if were ready to burst at any moment.

Masachika’s eyes instinctively bulged and he reflexively jerked backward. Seeing his reaction, Alisa’s smile grew all the more wicked, and she slowly began to undo the button.

“CLACK! DON’T GET ALL COCKY JUST ’CAUSE YOU’RE A SMOOTH AND SPOTLESS VIRGIN!!! SLAM!” A verbal bullet then suddenly shot at them right at that moment, with whoever it was from slamming the door shut before fleeing the scene…

“”……””

The two of them stood frozen in place, staring blankly at the door that had just opened and closed in a flash.

“…The heck was that just now?”

“…I wonder what that was just now?”

They then muttered in dazed unison.

It was only after a few seconds did all the meaning of what had been shouted finally caught up to Alisa’s brain.

“Eh, huh? D-did she… just say… v-vir… virgin? And… smooth and spotless…? Wh-what…?” She squeezed her trembling hands together, her eyes wide in shock, letting out a gasping, broken voice.

Clearly unable to settle her swirling thoughts, Alisa stood frozen in bewilderment. Leaving her to process the situation, Masachika quietly walked over to the door and peeked out into the hallway, but alas, the perpetrator was already long gone.

"Sure I am… But why would she… Or rather, how much did she hear…? Eh, f-first of all, wh-what was I even… A-acting like some kind of nympho…!?"

Turning back, Masachika now saw Alisa with a face rapidly growing in crimson as the full realization of her actions hit her. Seeing her in such a state, he wisely concluded that he should definitely not stick around for this part.

"Get some rest," he gave off those gentle parting words, quietly shutting the door before letting out a long, deep breath.

Saved… I was seriously saved there… Or can I even say that…? He thought, tilting his head slightly, unable to fully process what had just happened.

He then headed toward Yuki's room, and after knocking and hearing her reply, he stepped inside, only to find her sitting on her chair like some final boss waiting for her challenger, a fearless smirk plastered all over her face.

"Oh? Leavin' Alya-san all behind like that, *my brotha*?" she spoke in half English.

"Hey… What the hell was that just now?"

"What, you ask?"

"Like, the heck did you mean by smooth and spotless? More importantly, from when—and how—did you listen to us in the first place?"

"Well, like…" Yuki started, casually picking up a glass from a nearby table, tilting it sideways as she pressed its bottom to her ear. "Like this. Pressing a glass against the door."

"You serious? That's so old-fashioned. Wait, could you actually hear anything like that?"

“Nope, not really, to be honest… But I could sense it, y’know? I got that feeling you were all flustered, and that Alya-san was havin’ a great time, so I just figured she was probably getting a li’l too full of herself. Like that.”

“The hell kinda sixth sense is that…?”

“*Fufu*… I’ve got an ahoge[1] that’s capable of detecting the waves of romcom energy…” Yuki pointed to the little tuft of hair atop her head.

“Ah, gotcha…” Masachika gave a flat response.

Dropping the act immediately, Yuki shrugged, her tone returning to normal.

“So, if you’re asking how much I actually heard, the answer’s basically nothin’. As for the ‘smooth and spotless’ thing, well I just sorta thought ’bout how Alya-san’s this pure, textbook definition of a virgin who’s probably never even seen a wee-wee before, so I guess it just came out on the spot.”

“A ‘wee-wee’? What are you, some grade-schooler?”

“Oh, and by the way, when I said ‘smooth and spotless,’ I actually meant it as in not havin’ any hair—”

“Sleep,” Masachika closed the distance between them in an instant, snatching the glass from Yuki’s hands as he scooped her up in a princess carry, laid her down on her bed, tucked her in, and put her to sleep.

“*Zzzz*~”

“Alright, she’s asleep,” Masachika nodded in satisfaction.

A knock then came at the door as Ayano entered at that moment, holding a small thermos.

“Masachika-sama…?” She tilted her head slightly as she called out to him in a questioning tone, with Masachika judging that she must’ve expected him to still be with Alisa from her expression.

“Counting on you with the rest here. And also…” he lowered his voice and spoke quietly, hesitating briefly as he fell silent before quickly making up his mind as he met Ayano’s eyes directly. “Do you know where Mom is right now?”

“Yumi-sama, is it…? I believe she’s in her room at the moment…” Ayano answered, mimicking his quiet tone.

“I see. Thank you.”

“Hm…? Oh, my grandmother was wondering if, if it is alright with you, you might like to join us for dinner… Alisa-san as well.”

“…No thank you, we’ll pass. Alya probably has dinner waiting at home too.”

“Understood.”

“……” Masachika quietly watched Ayano as she lowered her head.

“Is something the matter?” Ayano asked, noticing him.

“Ayano… Did… something happen?”

“No, nothing in particular for me…”

“That so?” Masachika asked, the both of them still speaking in hushed voices.

He had also felt like something was a little off about her earlier too, but if she said it was nothing, then it might well have just been his imagination. He decided to let it go for now.

“You can always tell me or Yuki if anything ever does happen, okay?”

“Yes, thank you very much.”

“…*Mm*,” Masachika rested his hand on Ayano’s head with a gentle pat, then left the room. “Alright…”

After giving himself a small pep talk, he steeled his resolve and headed to his mother’s room.

★·☆·★

“Masachika-san… Um, are you really…?” Yumi trailed off as she asked from the entrance to the Suou family’s piano room, watching Masachika as he lifted the lid to the grand piano.

She watched with a demeanor that conveyed both her fear to come any closer, yet her inability to run away as well. She stood there, frozen in place. Masachika gave her a brief glance before lowering his gaze to the piano’s keys.

“I don’t really like the piano, you know?” he said.

“!”

He could feel Yumi’s breath catch in surprise, yet he didn’t look her way.

“Well, not just the piano actually…” he continued. “I pretty much don’t really remember ever thinking, ‘I really like this,’ or “Hey, this is fun,’ with all the lessons I had in this house.”

Though his words could’ve come off as a little bit sarcastic, Masachika held no resentment in his voice. He spoke with only a calm, matter-of-fact tone. Yumi listened silently.

“But the other day… at school, I had this sudden session, I guess, with my bandmates? At the time, and I really still don’t know why myself, but I felt like I was having fun… I thought for sure that it was the first time I’d ever really enjoyed playing music, but…” he explained before trailing off, letting his gaze wander around the piano room—a room which had hardly changed since his childhood—as he gave a small, wistful smile. His eyes no longer carried the bitterness they once had; only a bittersweet warmth that nostalgically embraced the past. “But then I remembered… about *waaay* back from when Yuki and I were really little… I think it was from before we started taking piano lessons… There was this one time we played the piano with you. Well, I mean, I’m not sure if you could even call what we were doing ‘playing’ back then, though.”

In truth, it was probably more like they'd been messing about as *she* played.

Yuki, being the mischievous girl she was—even as early as back then—would crash in with loud bass notes as their mother played. On the other hand, Masachika would randomly hammer out the high notes, chiming in with sounds that you'd hardly call a proper accompaniment. But even when her kids so blatantly disrupted her playing, their mother would only smile gently, improvising along with their chaos.

"We were just making noise however we liked… But even so, I loved those times."

Back then, without knowing even the basic fundamentals of playing the piano, without a single thought of playing an actual song, Masachika had simply just spent his time goofing about at the piano with his mother and sister. Those were moments he had truly enjoyed playing the piano. He loved it.

"I… really loved hearing you play the piano, Mom. I truly did." Masachika spoke his feelings aloud and clearly to his mother, with Yumi's eyes widening instantly in response, surprised at her son's words.

"So… could you play for me again?" he continued, pleading earnestly as he met those eyes.

He felt like he could remember it again if she did—the feeling he'd lost as he started to take proper lessons, as he worked hard to get better. That pure feeling of simply enjoying the piano for what it was, with no particular goal or purpose.

And also… the feelings the young Masachika Suou had for his mother, whom he had simply loved.

"Just once. Please… could you?" he asked again as he looked at her.

Yumi held his gaze in silence, and for a moment, it seemed like she might look away. Yet instead, she quietly closed her eyes, then looked back at Masachika once more.

"…Very well."

With that, Yumi finally stepped into the piano room.

★·☆·★

The sound of a piano suddenly echoed throughout the Suou manor.

Ayano lifted her head by Yuki's bedside, the tone of the playing telling her instantly that it was none other than Yumi.

"Why now of all times?" she wondered, tilting her head ever so slightly.

But as another sound joined the melody, Ayano's eyes flew wide open.

"Eh…?" That expression slipped out of her mouth in surprise before she knew it.

The second player's performance was clearly different from the first—it was a tone Ayano knew very well, after all. But even then, it was much less refined as it was now, especially when compared to the person she had always associated it with.

And yet…

Ah… She couldn't help but mouth.

It sounded as if they weren't trying to play skillfully at all. In fact, it really wasn't even good—it even felt like they were just hitting the keys randomly at times.

But despite that… no, maybe *because* of it, the music resonated deep within Ayano's chest.

Ah… *Ahhh…!*

She closed her eyes and clenched her hands over her skirt. And before her… on the bed, laid Yuki, a gentle smile quietly spreading across her lips.

[1]: アホ毛: Literally meaning “foolish hair,” is a single lock of hair that sticks out on top of the head, and is usually a visual cue to how a character is feeling or if they’re reacting to anything.

Chapter 5 - The Secret-Sharing Session Begins

The next day after school.

The usual gang had gathered inside the student council room along with four new additions: Takeshi, Hikaru, Sayaka, and Nonoa. In other words, everyone who had attended Alisa's birthday party was currently present.

Standing from where he could look over the long table, Masachika slowly glanced toward each of those assembled.

Touya, sitting at his usual spot on the other end of the long table, wore an expression that showed half curiosity and half worry, wondering what would unfold this time. At her usual spot next to him, Chisaki sent a discerning gaze toward the four guests—particularly at Nonoa. On the other hand, Maria, as always, cheerfully handed out tea to everyone, looking no different than usual. Takeshi sat in Alisa's seat, fidgeting restlessly while Hikaru, seated in Masachika's usual spot, looked like someone out of place, awkward. Meanwhile, Sayaka sat at Yuki's seat with a composed posture, looking calm and collected.

And lastly, at Ayano's usual seat, Nonoa rested her chin on one hand, wearing a look as if it were her actual chair.

After confirming the seating arrangements, Masachika exchanged a glance with both Yuki and Alisa, who stood on his left and right respectively. Ayano, by the way, was off to the side against the wall, blending into the air as usual.

And with that, he opened his mouth to begin.

"*Okayyy~*, thank you all for gathering here today despite your busy schedules, blah blah blah and what not."

"Hey, don't just skip the formalities like that!" Takeshi quipped out loud.

“Alrighty, with that nice straight man act from Takeshi to start us off, let’s get down to business. The reason I’ve gathered everyone here today is…” he trailed off, casting a brief glance at Alisa who stood to his right, before continuing. “To give a full explanation as to why Alya here left her own birthday party midway through… and along with that, to talk about the secret that Yuki and I have been keeping.”

“A secret…?” Chisaki frowned, puzzled, as Nonoa raised an eyebrow, seemingly having caught on to his intentions. All the while, Maria and Sayaka simply watched Masachika quietly.

The three boys, meanwhile, all shot him questioning looks.

Steeling himself, Masachika opened his mouth once again.

“The truth is—” he began.

“We’re actually siblings who share the same parents ♡” Yuki cut him off before he could even finish his sentence, hugging his arm as she made her grand declaration.

“*Kufu*,” a strange chuckle then echoed through the room.

“““““““……”””””””

With that, both the bomb-dropping side and the bomb-receiving side instinctively turned toward the source of it—Sayaka.

There she was, covering her mouth with her hand, all the while lowering her head, hiding her expression.

Was that… a sneeze? Masachika guessed, exchanging a glance with Yuki who still continued to cling to his left arm, the two of them tilting their heads in perfect sync, sharing a confused expression.

“*Kufu*,” she let out the strange noise again. “So precious.”

They then turned silently toward Sayaka again, seeing her trembling, still with her head lowered, but now with her eyes sharp as blades as she stared right at their souls.

It was terrifying, *extreeeemely* terrifying.

"*Mm*, yeah. Yeah? Huh, siblings? Siblings!?" Hikaru raised his voice in shock at that moment, being the first to process the information.

This prompted the others to snap out of their stunned silence, turning to face Masachika and Yuki.

"Y-you guys—wait, no, not *you guys*—you're not childhood friends, but siblings!?" Takeshi then reacted, standing up in visible agitation, accidentally addressing Yuki so casually as part of "you guys"[1] as his words tumbled out in confusion.

"What… d-do you guys mean by that?" Touya asked.

"Actual siblings…? Eh? But your last names are different. Ah, wait, that makes sense if it means your parents got divorced, huh…?" Chisaki followed suit.

Maybe due to the fact that Hikaru and Takeshi had reacted so bombastically at first, or maybe because of their more refined maturity, both Touya and Chisaki had voiced their confusions with a higher degree of composure.

Takeshi, on the other hand, still couldn't shake his bewilderment as he clutched his head in shock.

"S-siblings? So, that means you're brother and sister… Huh? This isn't some joke, right?" he spoke rapidly. "No wait, yeah, I could totally see you doing that, Masachika, but I sure as hell can't imagine Suou-san joking about in the same way… Wait, then why did you call yourselves childhood friends? Didn't you guys say you were childhood friends?"

"Calm down, Takeshi. I'll explain everything properly. Just sit down for now already."

"Wait, huh? So who's older?" Takeshi continued to ask. "Or are you twins? No, that can't be it, you don't look alike at all…"

"Yes, yes, we get it," Masachika eventually managed to get him to sit back down, having reined in Takeshi's flood of questions, before attempting to resume his explanation. "No, and firstly, how long are you gonna keep clinging to me?"

He then brushed Yuki off his left arm instead.

"*Eek~*♡"

Ignoring her overly theatrical cry, he lightly cleared his throat.

"Let's see, well first off, I'm the older brother; she's the younger sister…" he said. "To put it simply, I left the Suou family when I was a kid, and… well, I was basically disowned. So, from the Suou family's perspective, I was treated as if I basically never existed."

"Like you never existed…" Takeshi muttered in shock, with Hikaru and Chisaki both furrowing their eyebrows, while Touya and Maria's eyebrows twitched slightly.

Deciding to ignore their reactions for now, Masachika pressed on.

"And because of that, Yuki and I were treated as unrelated strangers as far as the public was concerned. It's why we've called ourselves childhood friends. And yeah, even though it wasn't avoidable due to our family circumstances, I'm still sorry for deceiving all of you. Sorry for that," Masachika explained.

"I would also like to offer my genuine apologies," Yuki added.

With that, the both of them—and Ayano as well, for some reason—bowed their heads.

"Ah, no, it couldn't be helped if that's the case, isn't it? Yeah, you guys couldn't do anything 'bout it, right? So, *uhhh,* I guess you two don't need to apologize? Or rather, yeah…" Takeshi hurriedly spoke up, flustered.

"It's one of those grown-up circumstances, right? Then, yeah… It can't really be helped, can it?" Hikaru followed suit, reciprocating his tone.

Though the two were still clearly struggling to fully process the whole situation, they tried to brush it off lightly. Touya and Chisaki, both wearing serious expressions, gave nods of agreement.

"Yeah, if it's a family matter, that is…" the former concluded. "But still, siblings? Siblings…"

"Yeah… But why are you revealing it now, of all times?" the latter asked.

"*Uhhh*, like I'd just explained," Masachika lifted his head and answered, "I was basically disowned and hadn't been back to the Suou manor in years… But during Alya's birthday the other day, from when Yuki had caught a cold and I was hesitating over whether I should visit her or not, Alya had pretty much pulled me along and gave me the push I needed. Oh, and it was then that I told her that Yuki's my little sister."

"*Ohhh~*, I see. So since you'd already told her, you figured this was a good chance to tell the rest of us too, didn't you?"

"Yes, well… something like that. Alya had basically given me the courage I didn't have, so it's also pretty much my fault that she'd left halfway through…"

"No, well, we're not hung up on that anymore, so you guys don't have to be either. But I see… So that's what happened, huh…?" Touya crossed his arms as he thoughtfully hummed, with the others showing signs of understanding as well.

That is, until Chisaki suddenly turned to Maria.

"By the way, Masha, you don't look shocked by this at all. Could it be… you already knew?" she asked, glancing at Alisa with a look that practically asked, "Did Alya tell you beforehand?"

But since Alisa hadn't done anything of the sort, she shook her own head and looked at her sister with an expression that conveyed her own suspicion and confusion.

Drawn in by this exchange, Touya and Yuki also turned questioning gazes toward Maria…

All the while, Masachika felt the blood drain from his face.

Oh shit! I was so focused on explaining everything I completely forgot this was bound to happen! That's right, Masha-san already knows 'bout us!

On top of that, the whole reason why Maria knew that Masachika and Yuki were siblings was because she'd known him from back when they were little. If things kept going on like this, then even *that* part of their past would end up being revealed at this rate…

As Masachika faced an internal, panic-induced mental crisis, Maria, utterly unfazed, gave her usual soft smile.

"*Hmm*~, just a feeling?" she spoke calmly. "Like, Kuze-kun and Yuki-chan somehow always gave off this sibling vibe whenever I watched the two of them. I guess I sensed that kind of atmosphere from them~"

"What kind of vibe is that even supposed to be?"

"*Hmm*, right~... They really understand and trust each other, but there's absolutely no romantic tension between them, I guess~? If anything, it's always felt like they're family. And if you look closely, their eyes are super similar. So I thought that, maybe, they really were just siblings~. Something like that," she reasoned.

"That's some crazy deduction right there... No, but now you mention it, their eyes *do* kinda look alike... huh?" Chisaki responded, initially wearing an expression of disbelief before resigning, not seemingly inclined to doubt Maria's words given this wasn't the first time she'd heard her say something strange.

"Huh? They look alike? Do they really?"

"Wait, now that you point it out... maybe they do?"

"*Hmm...*"

The guys furrowed their brows, glancing back and forth between Masachika and Yuki.

"How could you even figure that out from just their 'vibe'...?" Alisa then muttered that question.

"I didn't expect we'd be found out just by the vibe we had alone..." Yuki murmured similarly.

Phew, Masachika inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.

But then...

"So, Kuzecchi, you knew that Maririn-senpai had it all figured out, right?" Nonoa dropped that sudden ambush of a question, stopping Masachika's breath for a moment.

“Eh… is that true?” Alisa sent him a gaze full of suspicion, with Yuki, Sayaka, and the rest following suit.

Feeling all their stares as they clearly weighed in on him, Masachika met Nonoa’s gaze, her eyes having locked onto him, and his thoughts spun at full speed.

How did she—no, it’s because I didn’t react to Masha-san’s explanation at all! Damn it, I was too careless! What am I, fucking stupid!? What do I do? Play dumb? No, that’ll make me look even more suspicious after failing to react right away in the first place!

“*Ohhh*, she casually asked me ’bout it before, something like, ‘Are you two family?’” Masachika reluctantly nodded, grinding his molars. “It was so out of nowhere and she asked it so casually that I couldn’t come up with an excuse… I mean, it was basically the same as what happened with you.”

“Ah, gotcha~” Nonoa nodded with a languid look in her eyes as if satisfied. “But seriously, you didn’t tell Alissa?[2] Even though you’d been figured out? Thought for sure you would’ve told her once me and Sayacchi found out.”

“Huh, you two knew too?” Takeshi asked.

“Yup. Well~, I’d met Kuzecchi way back then, y’know? From when he still had Suou as his surname. Oh, and I told Sayacchi about it.”

“For real…?” Takeshi gave a somewhat convinced but dissatisfied expression as he heard Nonoa’s explanation.

And Masachika could tell exactly where that dissatisfaction came from—it was from the realization that Nonoa and Sayaka, who hadn’t known him for as long as he or Hikaru had, had learned about his secret before they did.

After all, right next to him was a girl whose displeasure was far more blatant.

【What’s that about?】

There was no need to know Russian to get the message. The sheer force of her annoyance—at her sister knowing Masachika’s secret before she did—practically radiated from Alisa.

Feeling it sharply, Masachika directed his attention to Takeshi—or rather, to Alisa—and offered an excuse.

"Look, I just want to make it clear… The first person I'd ever *voluntarily* told about this was you, Alya, okay? Nonoa figured it out all on her own, and Masha-san somehow did too, so I had no choice but to admit it given I wasn't able to hide it from them anymore… And honestly, I'd completely forgotten that Masha-san had figured it out 'til just now," he reasoned.

"Grandfather strictly forbade onii-sama from revealing our true relationship to others… But still, being found out twice is quite surprising. I suppose our sibling bond's simply too strong to conceal no matter how hard we try to hide it. Wouldn't you agree, onii-sama?" Yuki spoke teasingly as she rested her cheek on one hand in mock contemplation, once again clinging to Masachika's arm as she pressed up against him affectionately.

"*Huugh!*" Sayaka let out an excited grunt.

"*Okaaay~,* Sayacchi, let's just calm down for a sec~. Ah, don't worry 'bout her—she's just this super hardcore fanatic, that's all~" Nonoa casually covered Sayaka's face with her hand as she spoke, having had everyone turned toward them, causing the others to tilt their heads with a puzzled, "Hardcore fanatic…?" before turning their gazes back.

Then, seeing Yuki rubbing her cheek against Masachika's shoulder, Chisaki gave a strained smile.

"Yuki-chan… Isn't the way you're acting kind of… different here?" she asked. "Uh, are you always like this with Kuze-kun—ah, I mean, your onii-chan?"

"Yes, that's actually true. I really love my onii-sama very much."

"*R-reeeally~*? I see now…" Chisaki was left smiling awkwardly, clearly taken aback as Yuki declared her brocon tendencies aloud with a dazzling smile, despite still maintaining her formal mannerisms.

This is nothing compared to how she actually is… Alisa meanwhile shot Chisaki a look that practically shouted that thought, but no one noticed.

"*Uhhh*, how should I put this…" Hikaru scratched his cheek with a troubled half-smile, not sure how to react.

"*Hah, hahaha…*" Takeshi let out a dry laugh meanwhile.

"W-well, yeah…" Touya lifted his head and nodded vaguely in some inexplicable gesture. "It goes without saying that this is how the both of you are usually like then, but… take it easy at school, alright?"

"Hol' up, Prez. It's pretty unfair to make it sound like we're constantly clinging to each other in private, y'know~?" Masachika shook Yuki off again, aware that his sister was deliberately trying to act clingy to defuse the tense atmosphere.

What on Earth are you on about? Alisa meanwhile conveyed that retort in her look to him, but again, no one noticed.

Somehow sensing that exasperation of hers in the air, however, Masachika cleared his throat to cover it up.

"*Ahem*. Well anyway… the number of people who know about us being siblings has grown now; I did think it'd be unfair to keep it hidden for any longer. And I've decided to tell you all because I trust you guys. But please, I'm really asking you here—don't tell anyone else about this. It's a delicate matter concerning the Suou family."

Hearing his plea, casually laced with words like "unfair" and "trust," both Touya and Chisaki straightened their expressions immediately, giving firm nods.

"Yeah, don't worry. I promise I'll keep your circumstances to myself," the former reassured Masachika.

"*Mm*, leave it to me! I'll be your witness!" the latter declared proudly. "And if anyone leaks this, I'll make sure they'll get the appropriate punishment! Oh, if you want, should we draw up a blood oath?"

“Thank you very much… but, uh, no, the whole punishment and blood oath stuff’s not really necessary… I mean, you’re all precious friends, after all. Appreciate the sentiment, though…” Masachika shot a nervous smile at Chisaki as she struck a strong pose while slapping her right bicep with her left hand, her playful and joking tone doing little to mask the seriousness of her words.

Takeshi and Hikaru, also a bit uneasy from her antics, nodded at Masachika.

“No, honestly, I still haven’t fully wrapped my head around this whole thing at all… But I won’t tell anyone. It’s one of my best friend’s secrets, after all.”

“Yeah, thanks for telling us. Promise I won’t say a thing to anyone. Don’t worry, unlike Takeshi, I’m tight-lipped.”

“Oi! Why’re you sayin’ that as if I’ve got a loose mouth!?”

“*Yeeeah*, maybe not so much that you’ve got a loose mouth but… more like a slippery one? Like I feel you’re always blurting stuff out on a whim…”

“N-no no no, that ain’t true, okay!?”

“Say that with confidence, man,” Masachika interjected with a half-smile as Chisaki tilted her head while cracking her knuckles ominously.

“What d’you wanna do? Wanna take care of it now while we still can?” she asked ominously.

“Sarashina-senpai!?” Takeshi yelped. “What d’you mean by ‘take care of it’!?”

“Like, making sure you get an intense headache the next time you try to talk about this…”

“You tryna implant some trauma in me, or something!? I swear, I won’t tell anyone even without you doing that!!”

“Oh, like those kinds of curses they place on assassins in manga?” Masachika commented. “Honestly pretty curious on how that would actually work…”

“The hell, Masachika!? You’re okay with your best friend having his brain messed with!?”

“Who knows, maybe you’d have all kinds of brain chemicals released instead, making it actually feel amazing, y’know?”

“You’re cool with me making ahegao faces!?”

“…Okay, let’s definitely not have him do that, Sarashina-senpai,” Masachika stood down with the thought that Takeshi brought up.

“No, I mean, I wouldn’t be messing with your brain to begin with, though?” Chisaki clarified.

“My brain?”

“In other words, that’s the key point (miso), right?” Masha chimed.

“Can you not suddenly say weird things like that, Masha-san?” Masachika quipped as he turned to her with a deadpan look.

“But since Chisaki-chan said so (soy sauce), then that’s the key point (miso), right?”[3] Yet she responded with full confidence, raising one finger as if presenting a profound truth.

“…I-I guess?”

“*Fufufu*, as expected of you, Kuze-kun,” Maria laughed with satisfaction, with the long-time veterans of her antics, Chisaki and Touya, finally seeming to realize what she was trying to get at.

“Eh? Are you trying to make a joke, Masha…?” Chisaki asked. “It sounds too advanced; I don’t really get it…”

“Is it really though?” Touya dryly asked.

Their comments seemed to clue in the others as well, with Sayaka pushing up her glasses as Nonoa uttered a “Yikes…” with drowsy looking eyes.

“Kujou-senpai’s sense of comedy really is…” Hikaru whispered before stopping himself, all the while Takeshi looked left and right in genuine confusion.

“Huh, huh, what does she mean?” he asked, but no one volunteered an explanation.

Alisa had her hand pressed to her forehead, meanwhile Yuki wore her unshakable, serene, archaic smile. As for Ayano… Well, same as always.

Anyone could tell that the atmosphere had gone completely off the rails, yet Maria, oblivious or maybe just simply unbothered, gave a soft smile.

“Of course, I’ll keep the secret too~,” she said. “I won’t tell anyone that Kuze-kun and Yuki-chan are siblings.”

“Ah, right. I mean, you’ve already been keeping it from everyone this whole time, Masha-san, so I’m not really worried about it…”

“Is that *sooo*~? Hmm, but… Oh! I know!” Maria suddenly clapped her hands together as if she’d come up with something genius, beaming with a bright smile. “Since we’re on the topic of sharing secrets, how about everyone shares one too~? Just one, let’s see~, slightly embarrassing secret, maybe? That way, if you leak the secret, then that means your own one gets leaked too~!”

“What are you even saying all of a sudden…?” Alisa mildly reproached her with a look of exasperation at her sudden suggestion of starting a secret-sharing session.

But almost simultaneously, Yuki promptly raised her hand.

“My onii-sama gives me a kiss every year on my birthday!” she proudly declared.

“Wha—hey!? Why’d you go and reveal that!?” Masachika cried out.

“Masachika, you really…?”

“Seriously, Masachika…?”

“Huh, for real…?”

“W-w-w-wait a sec! Lemme explain! First of all, it’s just one on the cheek or forehead! And more importantly, *she’s* the one who asked for it in the first place!!!” Masachika frantically tried to explain himself as stares of shock and mild horror surrounded him in an instant. “I don’t know if she got the whole idea from some American movie or what! But at some point she started saying things like, ‘You should express your love in both words and action on my birthday at the very least,’ or something like that. And then she made it tradition! I swear!”

“So that means… Huh? You do it too then, Suou? For Kuze?” Touya asked.

“Yes, I actually…” Yuki trailed off, her tone conveying her answer as she for some reason touched her cheek and averted her eyes with an expression of bashful embarrassment.

Oh, gimme a break with the blatant act already, Masachika stared at her with narrowed eyes as if to say.

The others, meanwhile, looked on with varying degrees of unease.

And then…

“*Ggh… Ha-hack—!*”

A certain fanatic began to clutch at her nose with one hand, blood clearly pouring out from it regardless.

“Huh, Sayaka-san!?” Hikaru raised his voice, startled, drawing everyone’s attention to her with Chisaki immediately shooting up on the spot.

“Whoa, are you okay!?” she frantically asked.

“Ah~, she’s fine~. *Okaaaay*, Sayacchi~, let’s keep holding onto that nose now~,” Nonoa then spoke up as she helped Sayaka, treating her like a child that needed their nose wiped, all the while the latter continued to drip more blood onto the table with an oddly dazed look on her face.

Nonoa then turned to Chisaki.

“As you can see, Sayacchi’s actually a hardcore Kuzecchi X Yukkii[4] fanatic,” she casually explained. “She gets excited whenever she sees them being close~”

“H-huh… Gotcha…” Chisaki responded.

“Wait, you were… like that, Sayaka-san?” Takeshi asked.

“I had no idea…” Hikaru commented.

“Sayaka-san…?” Alisa couldn’t help but voice her shock.

All four of them had turned to look at Sayaka with part surprised, part stunned faces.

“By the way, I once went to school with no bra and panties on back in junior high,” Nonoa then suddenly added, as if tossing it out casually.

“That’s a seriously embarrassing one!”

Her shocking confession completely overshadowed Sayaka’s bizarre behavior, and all eyes darted toward her in disbelief. In spite of this, Nonoa herself showed not even a shred of shame as she continued.

“Like~, y’know how there was that no-bra movement craze for a bit overseas?” she spoke. “I think I kinda tried it because of that? Welp, my nipples rubbing against my clothes bothered me so I quit after just one day.”

“““““““……”””””””

Her story was so brutally honest that not even Masachika—nor anyone else for the matter—could muster a reaction. Silence fell over the student council room as the mood had naturally shifted into that of a full-on secret-sharing session.

Those who had yet to confess a secret exchanged uneasy, panicked glances.

She totally went first on purpose just to set this whole thing up… This girl… Masachika thought.

Yuki wore her trademark innocent, archaic smile right beside him, masking the dark smirk that lurked behind it—something Masachika could practically see.

While he was half hallucinating that image, the next person stepped forward.

"Uh, *uhhh*, okay! I'll go!" Chisaki shot her hand up, as if feeling pressured by the atmosphere. All eyes turned toward her as she fidgeted with her fingers, blushing slightly as she spoke. "*Uhhh*, this, well… is kind of a half-funny story… Um, you know how a lot of people use fancy, elegant phrases here in this school, right? I didn't really understand stuff like that back in junior high yet… so when some guy in my class said, 'I'm off to shoot a pheasant,'[5] I…"

She swallowed once, glanced away, and hunched her shoulders before continuing.

"I said, 'Oh, I wanna see!' and, um… followed him."

"Oof."

"So, uh… what happened after that, Chisaki?" Touya asked.

"N-nothing! He told me he was just going to the bathroom halfway through, you know!? I didn't actually follow him into the bathroom or anything!" Chisaki frantically explained to her boyfriend, her face flushed a deep red.

The mood, frozen solid by Nonoa's revelation, finally started to soften a little with this unexpectedly wholesome blunder.

And maybe because he sensed the chance to keep the momentum going, or maybe because he didn't want to leave his girlfriend out to dry like that, Touya gave a small cough and raised his voice.

"That's right, if we're talking embarrassing secrets, then… Right, so I'm always washing my feet when I get home, you know…? Especially on summer days when I get really sweaty, right? Well… sometimes, I'll sniff my socks right after I take them off."

"*Ewww*…" Alisa conveyed her disgust.

“Huh, why though…?” Chisaki asked in a genuinely puzzled tone, making Touya slump a little.

“No, I get it coming from li’l sister Kujou, but having *you* react like that kinda hurts, Chisaki…” he admitted, seemingly originally expecting her to laugh it off with something like a playful, “*Ewww*, gross~”

“No, Prez, to be honest, I totally understand that a little!” Takeshi shot his hand up and stood right then and there.

“*Ehhh…?*”

“Y-you do, Maruyama? Really?” Touya asked.

“Yes! It’s like, y’know how there are times when… you still can’t help but sniff something even though you know it smells bad? I do that too—like after club activities. I’ll sniff my own shirt and think, ‘Whoa, it reeks… but that just proves how hard I worked today!’”

“*Ewww…*”

“*Reeeeally* pullin’ away from this, huh, Alya~?” Masachika gave a wry smile as he watched Alisa’s face tighten, her eyebrows drawn together in visible discomfort.

But right then, Touya stood up, nodding enthusiastically as if he’d just found a kindred spirit.

“I get you, Maruyama!” he exclaimed in excitement. “A sweat-drenched shirt’s proof you gave it your all!”

“Yes! Exactly!”

“*Ahhh~*, I see, I guess? If you put it that way, at least… But still, socks…?” Chisaki couldn’t help but comment with a half-convinced, half-dubious face, her tone coming from a place between understanding and hesitation as she watched the two of them begin to forge a passionate (and agonizing-to-watch) friendship.

“Alright then… right,” Hikaru shyly raised his hand at that moment, eyes downcast in embarrassment. “I actually, um… used to watch those Sunday morning girls’ anime… You know, those magical girl type ones? I watched them pretty regularly until, um, my upper grades of elementary…”

“Huh, seriously? That’s unexpected.”

“I had no idea…”

“No, I mean, I’d originally just watch the show that came right on before it, but then I’d just, you know… One thing led to another, I guess…” Hikaru explained himself as Masachika and Takeshi stared at their friend in surprise, taken back by his unexpected confession.

“Oh, I watched those too!” Chisaki then suddenly chimed in. “They always seem like just magic girl stuff, but they’d always solve everything with guts and fists in the end. Man, those shows were pretty interesting, *riiight*~?”

“Ah, yep. Was basically about hot-blooded friendship and victory. Had more of the vibe of shounen manga, really, even though the characters were all girls.”

“Can’t help but admire how two more people have unexpectedly related to each other again here…” Masachika interjected sarcastically.

“Well, that’s because—*ack!*” Sayaka attempted to join in on the conversation, only to accidentally snort on her nosebleed on the realization that she was supposed to be a closet otaku, the red blood being sucked up right back into her nose.

“Okay, okay, Sayacchi~. Calm down now, let’s not get too excited~,” Nonoa promptly urged her to stop.

The hell’s goin’ on over there? Masachika glanced over with an expression that matched his thoughts.

“Well then, I guess it’s my turn, right~?” Maria then spoke up. “Um, this… is really embarrassing, but…”

She lowered her head slightly and held her cheeks in her hands, the way she carried her tone making it sound as if she was about to reveal some huge, earth-shattering secret.

Everyone leaned in a little in anticipation.

“I actually… used to think the reason seawater is salty was because fish sweat~,” Maria finally confessed with a bashful smile.

““…What?”” Masachika and Chisaki said in perfect unison, glancing at each other before the latter turned back toward Maria.

“What do you mean?”

“*Eeeh*~? You don’t get it~? So, like, the reason seawater is salty is because the fish sweat into it, right?”

“…By that logic, then rivers would be salty too, wouldn’t they?”

“Well, but rivers are flowing, aren’t they~?”

“Yeah?”

“So, it’s like a shower then? The sweat just gets washed away, so I figured that’s why river water stays fresh.”

“…I see.”

“No, Chisaki, you’re not supposed to agree with that,” Touya cut in, sounding a bit exasperated as he gave a wry smile. “Going with older sis Kujou’s logic, then the farther down you go, the saltier the river would get since the sweat from fish upstream flows downstream, right?”

“Ah, right. Yeah… Yeah, that’s how it’d be, wouldn’t it?” Chisaki nodded slightly, starting to be convinced as Touya kept going.

“But fish don’t sweat in the first place… Do they?” He then followed up confidently before tilting his head in doubt.

Masachika furrowed his brows, faced with a question he’d never actually thought about before.

“I don’t think they do…” he cautiously nodded. “They don’t have sweat glands, and probably don’t regulate their body temperature either.”

“Oh? Then why’s seawater salty?” Takeshi posed the question, yet no one could immediately answer.

Silence fell over the room, and after everyone stiffened a bit collectively, Masachika cautiously opened his mouth again.

“Isn’t it… well, because of the minerals from the soil dissolving out?” he suggested.

“You mean from the ocean floor?”

“*Hmm*~. No, wouldn’t it be more from mountains and stuff, carried in by rivers? The ocean floor’s got high water pressure and all that…[6]”

“Wait, doesn’t that mean river water’s basically just weak saltwater too?” Takeshi asked.

“Yeah… No, *hmm*?” Masachika froze again, unsure how to explain that part.

But then, Maria chimed in with her usual soft, fluffy smile.

“Kuze-kun’s right, you know~? And Maruyama-kun too,” she said. “Minerals from mountains flowed into the ocean and gradually accumulated over a really long time, so that’s why the ocean’s salty. Apparently that also means river water contains a little bit of salt too, you know~?”

“““““““*Ohhhh*~”””””””

Everyone let out a chorus of impressed murmurs as they learned the truth about something so obvious, yet something they’d never even questioned about before.

The secret-sharing session had now somehow turned into some trivia corner. That is… until Maria gently steered things back on track with a smile.

“Alright then, Alya-chan. It’s your turn to share a secret next, amirite~?”

“Eh?”

A killer pass casually tossed to her little sister.

“I don’t really have any embarrassing secrets or anything like that…” Alisa flinched with everyone’s attention collectively honed in on her.

She let her gaze wander for a moment, putting on an act as if she were thinking, before crossing her arms soon after, lifting her chin with a proud and defiant look.

“I always try to live my life in a way I won’t be ashamed of; I don’t have any embarrassing secrets,” she declared boldly.

“““*Ooooh~*””” Touya, Takeshi, and Nonoa all let out impressed voices in face of the kind of statement most people wouldn’t even dare to say out loud.

But…

“Oh my, is that so? In that case, perhaps I should remind you about what you mentioned before the other day—about changing in front of Masachika-ku—”

“*Nmyaaaaa!!!*” Alisa let out a wild, animal-esque screech, lunging at Yuki’s mouth with surprising speed to cover it.

The entire group froze, eyes wide at the sight of Alisa so thoroughly losing her composure in under a second.

And judging by their reactions, it looked like she’d been slightly too late as well…

“Cha… Changing? Eh, don’t tell me…?” Chisaki immediately arrived at the correct answer, and Alisa’s expression froze.

“*Ahhh~*, so actually, there was this one time I went along with Alya while she was shopping for new clothes,” Masachika quickly raised his voice to cover for her. “I guess this is about that? From when she got super into it and started doing this fashion show type thing in front of me? Right?”

“Masachika-kun!?” Alisa turned to him in shock, but he gave her a quick, subtle glance.

He wasn’t sure if she’d picked up on his signal, but upon blinking a few times, Alisa narrowed her eyes, albeit a little stiffly.

"*G-geeeez!* Why'd you tell them that!?"

"Ah, my bad. Figured it was useless to try and hide it at this point."

Though their exchange was so obviously forced and not even the slightest bit natural, Chisaki nodded along anyway, albeit before tilting her head in confusion for a brief moment.

"*Ohhh*, so *that's* what it was… Wait, that's not really all that embarrassing, though?"

"No no, she was seriously gettin' into it. I think it'd be pretty embarrassing, actually."

"Hold on, it wasn't *that* bad, was it?" Alisa continued with her attempt in covering up the true story.

"*Haaah*," Chisaki sighed. "Well… anyway, Alya-chan, isn't it about time you let Yuki-chan go?"

"Ah, right…" Alisa hesitated slightly, before then cautiously removing her hand from Yuki's mouth. "I'm sorry, okay? Yuki-san…"

"No, I was the one who overstepped. I apologize."

Contrary to Alisa's suspicion, Yuki had backed down immediately, offering a calm apology of her own.

She finally relaxed a little…

"By the way, about that time during the summer camp when you went no-bra—"

"*Nnnnngghhh~!*"

"You mean when she wore only non-branded clothes, right!?" Masachika attempted to cover for Alisa for the second time. "I mean, as long as it suits the person wearing it, then who cares 'bout brand name!"

"E-exactly!"

"And then there's that time your shirt got all see-through in that P.E. storage roo—"

"*Nnnnngghhh~!!!*"

“Oh, from that time her shirt got caught in some really weird place and she was flailing around! Yeah, that was actually pretty funny to watch!”

“Isn’t that a little mean, Masachika-kun!?”

“Hypno—”

“*Nmuuuuugh!!*”

“You mean the time where she got hypnotized right away despite making fun of that whole hypnosis thing, right!?!?”

The same cycle unfolded multiple times: Yuki dropping bombshells one after another, Alisa frantically trying to stop her, all the while Masachika scrambled to cover up the whole story.

“*Y-yeeeaaah,*” Touya let out a dumbfounded groan as he watched the scene unfold. “I feel like I’ve finally figured out the dynamic between these three.”

“I can at least tell that Masachika’s working his ass off here…”

“Yeah. Right, maybe it’s best if we just don’t question it further…”

“Alya-chan looks *sooo* lively here~. *Fufu*,” Maria chuckled.

“Um, is that really how you should be reacting as her sister here?” Chisaki asked. “More importantly, is Alya-chan okay with her rival candidate having that much dirt on her…?”

As their seniors and friends reacted in their own ways, Alisa finally broke down, practically shouting in desperation.

“My nickname in elementary in Japan was Tundra! There, are you happy now!?”

“That’s… really sudden… No, yeah, I see that.”

“Wait, don’t just agree with it, Masachika-kun!?”

“I mean, elementary school kids come up with pretty clever nicknames sometimes, don’t they?”

“What do you mean by that, you little—” Alisa spoke before moving next to Masachika.

"*Nmph!*"

Maybe because she'd completely run out of steam—or for whatever other reason at this point—she had let go of Yuki's mouth and instead grabbed at Masachika's cheeks, pulling them outward. The childishness of the gesture left Touya and the others with their mouths hanging open, all the while Maria smiled even more fondly.

After a moment, maybe because she noticed the looks she was getting, Alisa quickly straightened up as she tried to compose herself—though it was far too late for that at this point.

An indescribable, awkward air wafted through the student council room.

"*Uhhh*... Well then, guess that leaves Takeshi?" Masachika turned to pass the baton, holding his cheeks where Alisa had pulled them.

"Eh, me!?" Takeshi asked, jerking back in shock as he pointed to his own face. "No, wait, I'd already told you guys something with Prez just now, didn't I!?"

"That was just you piling onto his confession. Doesn't count."

"W-well if you're gonna say that, then what about y—"

"I'm the one who brought you all here to reveal my whole family thing in the first place."

"*Ngh, guh...*"

Cornered into *another* round of confessing when he'd let his guard down, Takeshi grimaced in agony.

"Just give us a big finale, Maruyama-kun! Something really exciting!" Chisaki chimed in cheerfully to push him along, trying to lighten the mood.

"Oh, that's right! C'mon, give us a story worthy of closing things out!" Touya jumped in too, and now both the president and vice president of the student council were egging him on.

Takeshi was quickly backed into a corner.

"*Wh-whaaaat~?*"

Letting out a pitiful whine, he darted his gaze around the room as if searching for help, his eyes eventually landing on Sayaka directly in front of him…

A few moments after he met her gaze, of which she was still holding a handkerchief to her nose, Takeshi stood up with a resolute expression on his face.

With all eyes of the room now on him, brimming with nothing but an incredible amount of anticipation, Takeshi took a deep breath.

“I actually like Sayaka-san!!!”

Time stopped.

Everyone froze, their eyes wide, and Sayaka’s handkerchief slipped from her grasp.

A few seconds passed…

““This ain’t the time for that!!!”” Masachika and Hikaru snapped, their voices overlapping perfectly.

[1]: Something that really can't be conveyed with just a translation—given "you guys" has a pretty neutral tone and is something you'd use to refer to about anyone in English—but "お前ら" ("omaera," literally meaning "you guys" or "you all" in some contexts) is a rough and incredibly casual way of referring to multiple people in Japanese, and is usually only used amongst close friend groups/people you're tight with. A more safe and polite/distant tone he could've used (and probably would've had he not been so consumed by shock) would be 君たち (kimitachi) or あなたたち (anata-tachi).

[2]: Yes she calls her this with a dragged out "s" here. She's actually called Alya this all the time; I just never wrote it that way because I felt it sounded dumb as fuck. Thought I might as well just do it now given she calls Masha "Maririn" (God she sounds so fucking dumb), which I'm like really confident it's the first time we've heard of that given the two have barely interacted.

[3]: Okay, let's get into the pun/joke (which is a stupidly niche one you really have to rack your brain to get even in JP in the first place):

The joke first starts off with Masha saying "つまり、それがミソってことね". This literally means "In other words, that's the miso, right?" with "ミソ" being miso. This is already a joke with a huge cultural implication: miso is a key ingredient in Japanese cooking, so it's often used to describe something distinctive, crucial, or literally "the point." Hence, in this context, she's basically saying "That's the key point," in reference to Chisaki's comment about how she wouldn't be messing with Takeshi's brain.

Now, though this isn't as niche to the point of never being heard before, it's still niche/confusing enough to most people, hence Masachika quipping in exasperation. The fun part is Masha then doubles down with a pun, which she then uses to recycle this joke, coming full circle.

Specifically, she says "茅咲ちゃんがしょーゆーってことは", literally translating to "But since Chisaki-chan soy sauce," with "しょーゆー" (shouyuu) literally meaning "soy sauce." The thing is, "しょーゆー" also sounds a lot like "そういう" (sou yuu), which literally means "to say so," but can be used in this context with her sentence to mean "But since Chisaki-chan said so," specifically in reference to Chisaki's point about not messing with Takeshi's brain.

She then uses this pun, now obviously on the theme of condiments/common staple Japanese cooking ingredients, to then recycle her original joke with "それがミソなんだなって", literally meaning "Then that's the miso, right?", with "ミソ" being miso. But like before, that then also means "Then that's the key point, right?" Hence, take all the puns and jokes away, you get her basically getting at something like "It's what Chisaki said—that's the key point."

[4]: Same deal as [2] in this chapter. Since I've already done it for Alya in this volume, I might as well do it for the other characters (even though it sounds so dumb). Specifically, Nonoa calls Yuki "ユッキー", with the "ッ/tsu" being used as an indicator to double a constant after it (in this case キ/ki, hence the double k), and the "ー/chōonpu" being an indicator for a dragged on vowel (in this case the vowel in キ/ki, hence the double i). Similar (but not exactly the same) to how Yoshida calls his girlfriend, Yuka, "Yukka" in Gimai Seikatsu.

[5]: 雉を撃ってくる: An old-ish idiomatic expression used by males to convey that they need to take a piss.

[6]: Dude what the fuck??? That's not how it works. Prestigious ass academic-driven school and they can't answer some fucking simple question 💀

Chapter 6 - The Bosses Emerge from Behind the Scenes

““This ain’t the time for that!!!””

“H-huh?” Takeshi flusteredly looked left and right as his two best friends snapped at him.

Going from his reaction, it was clear he had absolutely no grasp on just how reckless he was to jump straight into a public confession without any proper buildup. Both Masachika and Hikaru looked up at the ceiling in exasperation and utter disbelief, yet no matter how they reacted, alea iacta est. At this point, all they could do was watch it play out.

What’s her response? Virtually everyone wondered as their eyes honed in on Sayaka, waiting for her to speak.

She, in turn, had her eyes wide in shock.

“…Not a chance,” she eventually replied with a dazed voice.

Overwhelmingly absolute—concise, clear, and simple.

With those soul-crushing three syllables, Takeshi collapsed back onto his chair, his head drooping down sharply.

“T-Takeshi!” Hikaru grabbed at his shoulder, impressed by such a spectacular, textbook collapse.

“W-wait, hol’ on a sec!” Masachika leaned in forward beside Takeshi meanwhile, practically biting on his own tongue as he threw questions Sayaka’s way. “Wait, ‘Not a chance’? Like d’you mean that in a psychological or physiological sense!? Or is it because of the kinda situation where it’s something you just can’t do, like due to unavoidable family circumstances or having decided not to get a boyfriend, or anything like that!?”

Takeshi couldn’t help but twitch at Masachika’s rapid-fire line of questioning, with Sayaka blinking a few times.

“The former, I suppose…” she gave her answer after a moment. “It’s simply the fact that our family statuses don’t match.”

“So in other words, it’s not that you hate me!?” Takeshi suddenly perked right back up, shooting forward with enough force to practically leave behind afterimages.

Sayaka leaned back slightly in response, pushing up her glasses.

“It’s not that I hate you or anything… I just never even considered it.”

“Which means… I’ve still got a chance, right!?”

“W-well, I wouldn’t call it zero… I suppose?”

“Yes! Alright! *Alriiight!!!*” Takeshi celebrated with the realization that he hadn’t been outright rejected, pumping his fist up and down so fast that it looked as if his arm was vibrating on the spot. Masachika and Hikaru couldn’t help but give mixed looks of half exasperation, half admiration at the sight.

“You’re way too strong, dude…”

“Yeah, honestly… I kinda respect you.”

Objectively speaking, Sayaka’s answer wasn’t exactly a positive one. “I just never even considered it,” could just mean “I’ve never seen you in that way at all,” and “I wouldn’t call it zero,” could easily just mean “I’m being polite here, but it’s honestly basically a no.”

But to someone like Takeshi, it was still enough for him to be overjoyed.

And in fact, there was one other person in the room who'd interpreted it just as positively.

"*Woooow*~, great for you, Maruyama-kun!"

That one person being, of course, Maria…

"…Great?" Alisa responded skeptically to her sister's innocent clapping.

"That kinda hit me a little hard for some reason," Touya commented.

"Well, sure, it wasn't a public confession in your case, Touya, but… you were definitely way worse than Maruyama-kun here in terms of how sudden it was."

"*Guh*…"

And thus, the student council president quietly got a painful dose of black-history cringe.

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"You're seriously amazing, man… Really," Masachika couldn't help but praise Takeshi, who—despite the mess he'd made—had somehow managed to secure an actual date through persistent pushing, as they walked along the path to the school gates.

"For real… From an utter mess to actually scoring a date…" Hikaru added.

"No, it wasn't *that* bad," Takeshi reckoned in an attempt to defend himself.

"Nope, a screw-up's still a screw-up, y'know? I mean, a public confession? Some people seriously hate that kinda thing… Honestly, it's a miracle that Sayaka wasn't pissed."

"*Haha*, yeah, kinda reflecting on that part, too…"

As the three boys animatedly chatted about Takeshi's confession, Alisa followed a few steps behind them.

Given it was already late into the day, everyone had started to break off, heading home one by one after things had calmed down a tad bit.

Yuki and Ayano were currently waiting for the Suou family car while Sayaka waited for the Taniyama one, with Nonoa staying behind with her. Touya and Chisaki, both feeling pretty guilty for irresponsibly egging Takeshi on earlier, decided to stay behind in the student council office together for a little longer. Maria, looking out for them, stayed behind and decided she'd head home with the two.

So, in the end, that left Alisa going home with the three first-year boys.

What's more, Takeshi had initially wanted to leave with Sayaka, but Masachika and Hikaru grabbed him by both arms, dragging him away with a "Calm down now."

"Oh well, all's well that ends well… I guess?"

"Yep. He's managed to secure a date in the end… Like, ain't that actually a good thing?"

"Right~right! Man, my first ever date, huh~? Pretty moving, eh?"

"Amazing how it's expectation and joy hitting you first, not nervousness. Despite it being your first ever date…"

"Just to check, d'you even have any date clothes, Takeshi?"

"Huh?"

""Huh?"" Masachika and Hikaru reciprocated Takeshi's confused tone.

Even Masachika, who was typically mindful and smooth in bringing Alisa into the conversation, seemed too absorbed in this all-boys talk.

But for Alisa right now, it was actually for the better, considering she herself was still stuck in the wake of Takeshi's confession from earlier.

I can't believe he actually confessed so suddenly…

Though she'd only initially been caught up in the situation by chance, even Alisa, who'd been watching Takeshi's love life play out from the sidelines one way or another, found it incredibly shocking.

Because after all, to Alisa, a confession was something that was supposed to be done carefully—step by step and with great care.

And that naturally led her to think about…

I wonder when **I** *should confess to Masachika-kun…*

That.

Up to this point, Alisa had been so caught up in the giddiness of experiencing her first love that she hadn't really had the chance to think about it seriously before. Now that she's realized her feelings, the sheer event of a confession was simply something she couldn't avoid.

It's not like, um, I really want to become Masachika-kun's girlfriend or anything… Or do something because of it… She tried convincing herself.

Dates? They were basically already doing that in the first place, really.

And for things that only lovers could do…? Like kissing, or whatever comes after that…? She didn't want even that. Or rather, she'd never even thought about it.

And about that*, sure? Sure, I somehow kind of lost my mind yesterday and told him he could touch my chest… but that was me just teasing Masachika-kun. It's not like I actually wanted him to touch me or anything.*

Right, she definitely wasn't thinking about anything like that. Sure, there might've been this weird shiver that ran deep inside of her, but that was just because she enjoyed seeing Masachika all flustered. It was just her sadistic side being tickled, nothing more. And apart from that, the only other thing she felt was a tingling sensation around her chest, but that was just… her desire to be recognized as a woman lightly being scratched at. Absolutely not because of any indecent desires. Absolutely not.

That's right. I don't have any of these types of desires, m'kay? Well, maybe *if Masachika-kun says he really wants to touch me, then… No, that's not it! It's not like I want to do that kind of thing or anything…*

What then floated up in Alisa's mind was the look Masachika had yesterday, from when he'd been talking with Yuki.

Though he was so obviously exasperated by his little sister's behavior, constantly giving her the cold shoulder, there wasn't a single doubt in her mind that he had an endlessly kind look to his eyes—overflowing with nothing but a deep love and sense of compassion.

I want that too… I want him to look at me like that. I want to become someone important to Masachika-kun.

The desire to have that kindness, that affection, directed at herself.

And…

I want Masachika-kun… I want Masachika-kun to love me… the way I love him… She found herself wishing as she gazed feverishly at his profile while he walked ahead, calmly thinking about the next step. *So then, when should I confess…? Or the real problem, rather… how do I get that grandfather of his to approve of me…?*

That's right, Alisa, ever so composed, was already way ahead of herself, naturally skipping right past the whole "talk to the parents" phase. And given she had no intention of dating anyone without the goal of seriously getting married, this was an incredibly real issue for her.

Up until now, Alisa had never thought that there'd be any real obstacles regarding their family backgrounds. But she now knew that reality dictated Masachika as a potential heir to the renowned Suou family—a family that stood out and was respected even at the ever so prestigious Seirei Academy.

And on the other hand, you had her—someone who came from an ordinary middle class household. Not to mention, she was half-foreign too.

But is that actually a thing…? Like the kind of "We won't let any foreign blood into our noble lineage!" line of thinking, or something like that? Does that kind of thing actually happen anymore…? I didn't really sense anything like that from when we talked for a bit yesterday, but…

Letting her thoughts trail off, Alisa forced herself to stop overthinking.

The blood that ran through her veins was something she couldn't change—what mattered more was figuring out what she could do to be accepted in spite of it.

I'll just have to prove my competence to them after all, huh? Besides, I heard that Masachika-kun's own father came from a middle class background too, and he still married into the Suou family. So it's not like there's zero chance…

Though realistically, that was probably because his father had become a diplomat. So, should she become one too…?

No, that's probably something Masachika-kun's supposed to become, right? I haven't decided on what I *want to be in the future yet myself, and choosing a career for the sake of someone else feels a little off to me… In that case, what I should aim for is…*

The answer was already clear—a title that clearly demonstrates her own competence, one that was just barely within reach of what she could achieve now.

…To become the student council president. Then I'll join the Raikokai—that's where it all starts.

In the end, Alisa came right back to the same goal she'd been aiming for all along. It was something she'd always had her sights on, no doubt about that, but she was now adding a new, firm resolve on top of that.

I'll win the election, become someone I can be proud of, and confess to Masachika-kun!

There was surely no doubt about it—it would be the perfect timing.

They would take their time from here on to deepen their bond even more, step by step… And then, after claiming victory together, she would finally confess her love.

Perfect.

A plot so perfect that it could serve as the script for a drama show just as it was.

That's it.

Satisfied with her own flawless plan, Alisa casually tucked her hair behind her ear, composed. Her eyes, somewhat tinged with a sense of ennui, then drifted toward the townscape which had just begun to carry the faint hint of winter.

Yes, I'm making a purely calm and rational decision… All I'm doing is simply choosing the right moment with the highest chance of success for me.

That was all there was to it.

It had nothing—absolutely nothing—to do with the heart jolting moment from earlier, from when she heard Sayaka voice the very words, "Not a chance." Nor did it have anything to do with the stomach-churning image of Masachika rejecting her in the very same fashion that flashed through her mind.

Absolutely nothing.

I'm not, definitely *not, putting off my confession in any way here. It's not like I'm scared of being rejected or freaking out about the possibility, or anything, you know? And about secretly wishing for Masachika-kun to confess first by chance?* She squirmed at the possibility. *I'm totally not thinking about that at all, okay?*

Fidgeting with the tuft of hair she'd just tucked behind her ear, Alisa made all sorts of excuses to no one in particular inside her own head.

But just then, a distant memory popped right into her head—words her older sister had told her a long time ago.

"It's better to tell someone if you like them sooner rather than later, you know? Because once someone else snatches them away, it'll be too late."

She came back to reality with that and her fingers froze.

What if there was the possibility that Masachika would be taken by some other girl while she was busy putting off her confession…?

Alisa pictured the girls around Masachika and quickly shook her head.

…No way that'll happen, right? She thought. *If anything, Yuki-san looks the most likely here, but it turns out she's* **just** *his little sister. Ayano-san's his servant. As for Elena-senpai and Sumire-senpai… Yeeeah, given how they are and all… So then that leaves Nonoa-san… Huh, Nonoa-san?*

An image then came to mind at that moment—Nonoa flirting (?) with Masachika at the amusement park.

Given that she wasn't sure how serious Nonoa had been at the time, Masachika clearly rejecting her back then as well, and the fact that there hadn't been any signs of Nonoa making moves at him since, Alisa had nearly completely forgotten about it.

It's fine… right? Masachika-kun doesn't look like he really trusts her, and… he's straight up said that it's impossible for him to be attracted to her as a girl before too.

Remembering all of that, Alisa regained her confidence.

That's right. Masachika-kun, at the very least, definitely sees me as a girl. There's no way I'm losing to Nonoa-san in that department, she thought as she recalled how Masachika had his gaze completely glued to her chest yesterday.

"Fufu~n," Alisa let out that smug little chuckle, basking in the glow of her own superiority.

Yet at the same time...

"!!!"

She squirmed hard, practically writhing in embarrassment as she thought back to her own behavior during that moment. Barely audible screeches squeezed out from her throat and she gave little hops up and down on the spot. Realizing just how suspicious she must've looked just a second after, she hurriedly cast a glance toward Masachika walking ahead.

"But hol' on, how are you even planning on getting there?" he asked Takeshi. "It's pretty far, and like, that area's not close to any stations at all too."

"*Heh heh heh*... I've got a secret plan just for that... Behold: the cruise ship!"

"Huh?"

"You mean... you're gonna be travelling by river?" Hikaru asked.

"Exactly! Saw it on TV the other day..." Takeshi explained. "Ain't that, like, I dunno, the best idea ever? Getting to travel *while* sightseeing at the same time!?"

"*Reeeally~?* But ain't that a pretty high hurdle for a first date?"

Despite how erratic Alisa had been acting, Masachika didn't seem to notice that anything was off. In fact, he just continued to chat with the other two boys like normal.

Alisa let out a small sigh of relief... yet pretty much felt a little annoyed at the fact that she wasn't being noticed at all.

Then, with a mischievous grin creeping across her lips, she cupped a hand beside her mouth and prepared to whisper to Masachika.

【If you keep ignoring me like this, then… I'll have to hug and cling onto you from behind at this rate, you know?】she declared boldly in Russian.

And that finally did it. Masachika shivered and flinched, at last recalling the presence behind him. He turned around in a hurry.

"You say something, Alya?" he asked.

"Not really?" she answered. "I was just agreeing, that's all."

Alas, their usual back-and-forth: Alisa dodging his question with an innocent face in response to Masachika's willfully ignorant act.

And that would normally have been the end of it.

But this time…

"As I thought! I knew you'd think so too, right, Alya-san!?"

"No no no, she never said she agreed with *you*! She was obviously agreeing with *me*, right!?"

"Eh!?"

Her timing and her vague excuse of simply "nodding along" had apparently been too careless. Having had Hikaru and Takeshi now both turned around along with Masachika, the three boys eagerly looked to Alisa for support.

And all she could do was blink in utter confusion, having no idea what they were talking about.

Unable to honestly admit that she wasn't listening, Alisa's heart started to race in a quiet panic.

Luckily, however, Hikaru gave a wry smile and turned back to Takeshi instead.

"Like, c'mon man, no way that's the strat, right? You can't take the river—it's way too cold this time of year," he reasoned.

"Then we'll just wear some extra layers; we'll be fine!"

River…? Extra layers…?

Hearing bits and pieces from their conversion, Alisa's sharp mind quickly started to piece things together.

And in less than three seconds, she came up with an answer.

Ahhh, leather[1]*…? Like a leather jacket? They were talking about date outfits earlier too.*

Yep… She'd come up with a spectacularly off-the-mark answer.

Without realizing just how far off she was, Alisa pictured Takeshi in a leather jacket as she prepared to give her reply.

"I don't think it's a bad idea," she said.

"*Huuuh?*" Hikaru couldn't help but voice out his disappointment.

"Ain't that right!? See~, Alya-san says it's fine too! So it's totally A-okay from a girl's perspective!" Takeshi puffed up with pride, and Alisa gave him a polite, faint smile.

"But of course, it depends on the kind of leather (river), right?" she added, just to be safe.

"Huh, *ohhh*, right… *Errr*, what kinda river (leather) was it again?"

"I mean, I'd personally be creeped out if it's made from (if it's got) crocodiles or sharks, or something like that, myself…"

"No no! What're you talking about, Alya-san!? There's no way there'd be rivers (leather made) with crocodiles and sharks! This is Japan!" Takeshi reasoned.

"Hm? Yes, this *is* Japan… but I've seen them once at school before, you know?" Alisa continued persistently insisting.

"No way! Where!?"

"…In the cafeteria, if I recall?"

"Was there really!?"

"I definitely saw them once."

“F-for real…?” Takeshi gave a wry smile, as if he could hardly believe her words.

“Shark fin soup, maybe…? But no, crocodile…? Did they ever have that before?” Hikaru pondered, rubbing his neck as if he were trying to solve some grand mystery.

“??”

And all Alisa could do was tilt her head, her eyes wide in confusion in face of both their reactions.

Is it really that *surprising? Oh well, I guess it was also my first time seeing a crocodile leather pouch and an actual wallet made from shark skin…* She thought.

Yeeeah~, she’s totally misunderstanding somethin’ here, huh~? Masachika, who’d already figured out exactly what was happening, looked at Alisa with a lukewarm gaze meanwhile.

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“……”

That night, after getting a ride back home in Sayaka’s family car and finishing dinner, Nonoa lay sprawled out on her bed, thinking back on their conversation from earlier today.

“So, what didja actually think about it? About Takeshii’s confession,” she had asked bluntly as the two walked toward the school gates.

“Honestly…? I’m mostly just confused right now,” Sayaka had answered with no sign of hesitation.

“Hmmm~? *I mean, guess that makes sense. That was the first time you’ve had someone straight-up hit you with that kinda confession, amirite, Sayacchi~?”*

“That’s… right. I think.”

"But liiiike*, what d'you think? About Takeshii as a guy? A yes? A no? I mean, you've agreed to go on a date, so he's not a hard no, isn't he~?"*

"He's not my type at all to be honest. My ideal is someone like Gideon from One-Arm, or Thunder Spear Lime-kun from Kimi X Kime."

"Yeah, bringing up 2D boys isn't exactly helping your cause here, y'know~?"

"...But, that's it," Sayaka had said in a soft tone, pushing up her glasses as she had quietly looked away. *"Even setting aside all of the familial circumstances, I guess it honestly made me happy when he told me he likes me so openly... Even though he knows a little about this side of me..."*

"...Gotchaaa~"

"I suppose it kind of felt like I got to be the heroine of a manga or something? Well, the hero in question wasn't a tall or handsome guy, though," she had reasoned, having added that last part in a rush, clearly trying to cover up her embarrassment.

It was the kind of reaction that even Nonoa, her childhood friend, almost never got to see.

"....."

What Nonoa had said to Masachika back at the amusement park wasn't a lie—if Sayaka was happy, then she would be too.

Or at least, that's how she'd thought it would be.

But now, watching Sayaka's not-entirely-unwelcome-to-the-idea reaction, what welled up in Nonoa's chest was...

"So I'm just the odd one out in the end, huh?" she whispered, her lips twisted into a crooked smile. "That's *sooo* lonely. Lemme in on it too."

...A restless, constant, lingering sense of irritation—emotional horniness.

It was a part of her heart that she'd kept on hold since the amusement park, and it was that part that was now crying out, desperate for stimulation.

For Nonoa, the world had always been, put it simply, a boring place. It was something akin to second nature for her—no matter what she saw or did, her heart rarely reacted to anything.

But now there was something she realized. A realization that there might be someone other than Sayaka who was actually able to stir her heart.

Someone who might be able to give this twisted heart of hers a feeling it had never known before.

And now that it was something she noticed… she couldn't stop herself anymore.

Patience, patience. Juuust a liiitle more patience~. It's okay, it's okay. Things should start moving within the week~

The groundwork she'd been quietly laying beneath the surface was just about ready to sprout. The day the curtain would rise on this delightful little stage—one that could finally quench her longing thirst—was about to commence.

Ah, right. Gotta finish preppin' the final piece too.

With that thought occurring to her, Nonoa picked up her phone to send a message to Ayano.

But at that moment…

"Sorry Onee!" her younger sister Rea burst into the room, arms full of textbooks and notebooks. "Help me with my homework!"

She'd been weirdly motivated about studying lately, and this sort of begging wasn't a first. Nonoa had ended up helping her every time, but at this particular moment, she just wasn't in the mood…

"*Hmm~,* I'm kinda tired today, so let's do it another time."

“Another time’s too late! I’ve got a quiz tomorrow! So, *pleeeease*!” Rea pressed her hands together in front of her face, sneaking a peek at Nonoa from one eye.

It was quite impressive how thoroughly she understood her own charm. It was a kind of calculated cuteness. But to Nonoa right now, it had the opposite effect.

Ugh, annoying~. Wonder what kinda face she’d make if I just gave that skinny neck of hers a good squeeze~? The thought flickered through her mind for just a moment, but she quickly brushed it aside and got up from the bed.

“Okay, okay… Alright, just for a li’l bit, though.”

“Thanks, Onee! Seriously, I appreciate it!” Rea bounced onto the chair with what looked like innocent joy.

Watching her from the side, Nonoa looked down at the back of her neck and gave a little shrug.

Just kidding~. Not actually gonna do it. Mama told me to be nice to my li’l brother and sister, after all, and keeping good relationships with those close to me makes life easier anyway~

Nonoa couldn’t bring herself to do anything that would hurt Sayaka for the same reason either. She was important to her—someone irreplaceable.

But…

Kuzecchi’s probably never gonna be mine no matter what I do, right? So it’ll be fine, won’t it?

Just then, her phone vibrated in her hand. Picking it up and checking the message from Ayano, Nonoa let out a thin smile.

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“Sayaka, Sayaka?”

“Ah, sorry… What is it, Shiyouichi-niisan?” Sayaka asked after being called out to by the eldest of the Taniyama siblings, Shiyouichi, who’d caught her being unusually distracted by her own thoughts at the dinner table.

He was twenty-seven years old, currently working at a semiconductor manufacturer unrelated to the Taniyama family in order to gain some experience as a working adult. He wore his hair neatly groomed and had black-rimmed glasses. Despite there being a noticeable age gap, his features bore a striking resemblance to Sayaka’s.

“You seem pretty out of it tonight.”

“Did something happen at school?” one of her other brothers asked, in tow with her eldest.

He was the second son of the family, Itsuki—a kind-looking young man with slightly long hair that he tied at the nape of his neck. At twenty-two years old, he was currently in his fourth year of university, majoring in psychology and was a part of one of his university’s research labs.

“You were home pretty late today come to think of it, huh?” her third brother, a young man with flashy looks, donning multiple piercings in both ears and bright blonde hair streaked with red highlights, chimed in.

In spite of his appearance, he was the respectable third son of the Taniyama family—Kaketo. At nineteen years old, he was a second-year oil painting major at an art university.

The three were all handsome young men, each with a completely different vibe, yet they all carried themselves with undeniably refined auras. They were the three men who held the future of Taniyama Heavy Industries on their shoulders as future heirs, and to Sayaka, they were her respected older brothers.

“Actually, um…” Sayaka spoke up, feeling the three considerate gazes of her three brothers, fully aware she had gotten herself stuck in a mental quagmire, “A male friend… confessed to me today.”

She decided to confess her troubles honestly.

“““A confession!?””” The three brothers’ voices overlapped in perfect unison.

The youngest brother narrowed his eyes in an act of blatant suspicion, her second eldest wore a somewhat frightening cold sneer, while her eldest tried to put on a composed act, pushing up his glasses despite his violently trembling fingers.

The situation was probably already clear just from their reactions alone, but in truth, the three of them were massive siscons. They’d doted on her so much ever since their little sister was a child, to the point where if Sayaka had been an ordinary girl, she would’ve definitely turned into some self-centered, arrogant princess by now.

Nevertheless, whether Sayaka enjoyed being treated like a princess or not was a completely different matter. She’d always been like this since she was small: indifferent, no matter how much her brothers praised her, or how much they showered her with gifts.

But to her brothers, that fact—the reality that she wasn’t so easily pleased—only made her even more precious. In other words, they were bona fide perverts.

And now, news of some punk confessing to their adorable little sister had reached the ears of these hopelessly perverted older brothers. Their inner thoughts were naturally far from calm, but still trapped in swirling thoughts of her own, Sayaka remained oblivious as she poured even more fuel onto the fire.

“We’ve also, um… decided to go on a date…” she disclosed even further.

“““A date!?””” The three brothers’ voices harmonized perfectly once again.

But this time, from further beyond the table, another weighty voice arose.

“A date, you say?”

The owner of said voice being none other than the father of the four siblings, as well as the current president of Taniyama Heavy industries. Kazunari Taniyama, fifty-five years old.

“As I thought… Was that careless of me as the daughter of the Taniyama family…?” Sayaka timidly asked, reflexively straightening her back under the sharp gaze that exuded from behind his thick glasses.

Facing his own daughter’s tentative gaze, Kazunari set down his chopsticks, crossing his arms. He closed his eyes and lowered his face, an action that prompted Sayaka to shrink back even further.

Little did she know, his true thoughts were…

It’s not like that, Sayaka… Please don’t make such an apologetic face…

Along those lines…

In truth, Kazunari had always wanted a daughter from the moment he got married. But having faced child after child turning out to be boys—three in a row in fact—he’d been on the verge of giving up. He had thought it was utterly hopeless, a lost cause.

But then finally, right before hitting forty, Sayaka was born.

He was filled with so much joy when she came to this world that he had even decided to designate her birthday as a company-wide paid holiday. That is, until his wife stopped him with a slap.

“Don’t give your wife so much stress right after birth,” she had reprimanded him.

At any rate, that was just how much Kazunari adored Sayaka as a father.

But although he wanted to spoil her rotten deep down, there was also his personal creed that a proper parent should not treat their children differently. Additionally, since his sons had already, and were still, doting on their little sister so much, he felt that it was his duty, at the very least, to be strict with her. And, to top it all off, there was his pride. The desire to be a cool, dignified father in his daughter’s eyes.

All of that combined to culminate in the pitiful figure of a father who loved his daughter to death, while being unable to show it openly.

And perhaps thanks to that, Sayaka—despite being doted on and spoiled so rottenly by her brothers—grew up to be a proper young lady, the kind you could present to society without shame as a daughter of the Taniyama family.

But in exchange, Sayaka had apparently cemented the image of her father as a strict man in her mind. It was something that Kazunari himself no longer knew how to break, despite it being the character he'd built.

I have absolutely no intention of forcing her into a political marriage… And yet, why does she always get the wrong idea, like during her junior high school elections? It's not like I ever once pressured her to join the Raikokai, or marry someone who'd benefit the Taniyama family… No, Sayaka does *deserve the best possible partner, someone truly worthy of being the husband to the heiress of the Taniyama family… But is that something that possibly pressures her too? Then again, letting her off with any random guy is just… Ugh…*

So there Sayaka's father sat, suffering in his own solitude, all the while her mother shook her head left and right in exasperation, seeing through all her husband's turmoil.

Meanwhile, the three brothers closed in on Sayaka.

"Oi, who the hell's this guy!? He asked you out on a date right away after confessing? He's not some player, is he!?"

"That's right. Maybe it was careless of you to accept the date… Looks like we'll need to properly follow up on this."

"That's it, Itsuki. We should probably go along with her on the day of, just in case."

"N-no, that would bother Takeshi-san too much…" Sayaka reasoned, hastily attempting to stop her brothers and their onslaught of wild overreactions.

But alas, that too was careless of her.

Specifically, in that she had just accidentally let the name of the guy in question slip out…

Takeshi... All four men of the Taniyama family narrowed their eyes in unison.

Thus, in that moment, unbeknownst to Takeshi himself, multiple bosses emerged on his path to romance.

[1]: Leather (革) is pronounced as “kawa,” the same as river (川), hence her mix up. The mix up continues later down, so I’ll indicate with () with what each opposing party interprets it as.

Chapter 7 - Evil Teaches

The cries of a piano wailed throughout Music Room One.

The person playing it was none other than Masachika, and the members of the wind ensemble could only look on with awestruck expressions.

It was at times powerful and gallant, yet at other times light and delicate. The piano simply sang in response to Masachika's fingers.

With the lingering resonance fading away as he slowly lifted his foot from the sustain, silence enveloped the room…, only for it to suddenly erupt into applause after a few seconds.

"Amazing! That was seriously amazing!"

"Damn, that was really moving!"

"That was wonderful! I could listen for a whole 'nother hour!"

Cries of admiration rang out as the wind ensemble members rushed up to Masachika all at once. Feeling a little bit awkward when faced with their warm praising gazes, he stood up and gave a polite bow.

But that only prompted another shower of applause, and just as it began to settle… **Clap, clap,** came a pair of oddly timed claps. Turning toward where it rang out from, Masachika saw Elena slowly walking up from behind the other club members.

And yet, no one made way for her.

"Ah, wha! *Heeeey~*, why're you all being so mean to me~!" the club president childishly protested, drawing laughter from her club members as they stepped aside.

Putting her smug expression back on again, she then nodded aggressively—her head bobbing up and down repeatedly—as she offered a showy, theatrical applause.

"*Bravooo~!*"

"No, what's with the whole 'mentor watching over me from the shadows' kinda act?" Masachika couldn't help but jest at her pompous demeanor.

"It's 'cause I discovered you."

"That's true, but—"

"There's nothin' left for me to teach you now."

"Alright, thank you all for today."

"I haven't let you leave yet though!?" Elena grabbed at Masachika's arm to stop him, with the latter having given a quick bow as he tried to leave in face with her gag that showed no sign of stopping.

With no choice but to drop her theatrical tone, Elena applauded Masachika again, this time sincerely.

"My my, you've really shed some skin for the better here, huh?" she complimented him genuinely. "That was really wonderful, Kuze-kun."

"Shed some skin…? You haven't even heard enough of my playing to say that though, Elena-senpai?"

"You can easily tell whether a man's shed some skin just by lookin'!!!"

"…Waiting for some straight man comeback here?"

"Eh?"

"Huh?" Masachika stared at Elena with a genuine look of confusion as he faced her blank look, suspecting for a second that she'd made some kinda dirty joke, before clearing his throat uncomfortably. "Never mind… Forget it."

"That so? Oh well, anyway, now that you've shed some skin and become more sensitive, no, more delicate—!"

"So you *do* know what you're saying!" Masachika snapped out loud, earning a cackling laugh from Elena.

“What did you mean by that just now, Prez?” One of the club’s bona fide innocent, noble young ladies voiced that simple question just then.

“*Uweh!?*” Elena could only muster a sharp yelp in response, faltering under the pressure of such a probing question right after she’d been quipped at.

Her eyes darted all over the room, as if she was searching for someone to bail her out. Yet, all Masachika and a handful of male club members who understood what she’d meant wore expressions of complete indifference, cornering her even further.

“*Ugh, uuuuuu…*” Elena averted her eyes from the pure gaze of the young, innocent lady, stammering as she tried to dodge the question. “It’s… Right, it’s something you’ll come to understand once you turn eighteen, I think. Yeah…”

“That’s right,” Souma affirmed.

“*Ufufu~*,” Arai giggled after.

“Wait, these two aren’t even eighteen themselves…” Masachika couldn’t help but point out, throwing an “Are you for real?” look to Souma and Arai, who’d both delivered their typical, predictable comebacks.

“Anyway…!” Elena chimed as she composed herself just then, speaking with a more resolute tone, “You really looked different there. I was honestly moved, Kuze-kun.”

“Just to clarify, how, and in what way exactly, am I different…?”

“In what way…?” Elena spoke. “Every way?”

“That’s so vague…”

“Well, it’s ’cause the quality of your tone’s obviously different,” she reasoned. “It felt, how should I put it… It just felt free.”

It was just meant to be a completely offhand remark, yet it was so unexpectedly sharp. Accurate to the point where Masachika couldn’t help but widen his eyes slightly.

Now, it was true that, after being able to play with his mother, Masachika was able to let go of all of his pent-up resentment he'd held toward the piano. But even so, was it something that really reflected in his playing to that extent?

Masachika glanced around at the others, but the other members of the wind ensemble only wore vague expressions. It had truly just been something unique to Elena's sensibilities.

So this *is what it takes to be the president of the wind ensemble, huh…? Or rather, maybe she's just strangely perceptive when it comes to people's emotions.*

As Masachika quietly revised his opinion of her, Elena clapped her hands sharply. **Clap, clap.**

"*Okaaay~,* now then!" she beamed, grabbing everyone's attention. "Now that we've gotten a good sense of Kuze-kun's abilities, let's all finally start playing together!"

"""""""Yes!"""""""

And thus, Masachika's joint practice with the wind ensemble officially began in earnest.

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"Alright then, thanks for all your hard work. I'll be heading out first~" Masachika announced, bowing slightly.

Practice was finally over.

Given he didn't have any instruments to put away, Masachika left the music room ahead of the others, only to stop right in his tracks as he stepped out into the hallway, his face turning sour.

There stood Yuusho, leaning against the hallway with a chin to his hand, with whom he'd locked eyes with.

"Hey… What're you here for again?" Masachika asked in a slightly ticked off tone. "Stalking me, or something?"

“Rude as ever, aren’t you…?” Yuusho responded sarcastically. “I’m someone who *gets* stalked; I don’t do the stalking.”

“That right?” Masachika responded with disinterest, his reluctance to engage with Yuusho increasing even further after the latter delivered such a disgustingly narcissistic remark with casual flair.

He tried to walk past him quickly, but…

“Just wait, will you…?” Yuusho called out to him, smoothly stepping one long leg forward to block Masachika’s path. “I came here today because I have something to talk to you about.”

It was an action so cliché that you probably wouldn’t even find it in any modern-day shoujo manga.

“What now…?” Masachika shot him a cold glare from the side, but Yuusho remained unfazed, running a hand through what barely even qualified as bangs.

“The light music club has actually recently asked the piano club to vacate our room,” he explained.

“Huh? The light music club?” Masachika turned to Yuusho with a look of suspicion, hearing the name of the club his friends belonged to. “Why? They’ve already got their own room, don’t they?”

“That’s *exactly* what I told them, you know~? But all they said was that their current room is way too small, and how it’s basically just a storage space for instruments. More than that, they complained about how they can’t really practice there in the first place since it’s shared with other clubs.”

“…Ah, I get it.”

Though Masachika had only entered it once or twice on the premise of his student council duties, he did recall that the piano club’s room was fairly spacious. It was properly soundproofed as well. If the light music club could use that space as their clubroom from now on, they wouldn’t need to borrow the music room they were currently using anymore. They could also practice freely whenever they wanted too. That’s what they probably reasoned with.

But still, for the light music club to demand that the piano club leave their space…? Masachika thought it over, quickly figuring out why his friends would demand something like that in the first place.

"It's almost been a whole month since the piano club's dropped below the minimum number of members, huh?" he clarified.

"Well, that's how it is, isn't it?"

"Stop with the whole 'it doesn't concern me' act. You've caused all of this, you know?"

Clubs were required to have at the very least five members at this school in order to maintain official status. Falling below that number and not recovering within a month deemed that a club was to be demoted to just a mere interest group. In the piano club's case, members had begun to quit one after another after Yuusho's schemes after the cultural festival had come to light. It had gone to the point where they had dropped below the threshold in mid-October, and now, their one month grace period was about to end next week.

"That's not important here," Yuusho dismissed Masachika's comment.

"You don't get to say that."

"Oh shut up… What I'm interested in is whose idea it was in the first place."

"Huh…?"

Right at that moment, Music Room One's sliding door opened, and members of the wind ensemble began to file out. They glanced curiously at Masachika and Yuusho as they stood in the hallway, calling out with their goodbyes to the former.

Replying as he watched them head off down the corridor, Masachika gathered his thoughts, before turning toward Yuusho with a sharp gaze.

"So, in other words, what you're saying is the person who's proposed all this is Nonoa?" he asked.

“As I thought; sharp as ever, huh? That’s exactly it,” Yuusho nodded without hesitation, and Masachika frowned.

It was something he’d guessed as much, drawing from the warnings that Yuusho had always given him about Nonoa. He’d apparently hit right on the mark too.

“...Got proof?”

“My intuition.”

“Cut it out already, asshole,” Masachika openly showed his irritation in face with what sounded like baseless accusation against Nonoa, someone he had acknowledged as, at the very least, a friend. He let out a breath in an attempt to calm himself, scratching his head roughly before glancing sideways at Yuusho’s face. “And? What about it? It’s not even strange for the light music club to want the piano club’s room in the first place. And even if, by some small chance, Nonoa made that proposal to screw you guys over, it’s got nothing to do with me, does it?”

“It *does* have something to do with you, actually.”

“Huh?” Masachika grunted with irritation.

“As it happens, our vice president’s planning to actually raise this proposal from the light music club to a student assembly. That makes you involved in that case, doesn’t it?”

“……”

Organizing and being in charge of student assemblies was a responsibility that fell upon the student council. If it came to that, there was a high chance that Masachika, an official of said student council, would be roped in. But even so, given his role meant he’d be participating under the guise of being a mediator—so in this case, basically an onlooker—it still felt like someone else’s problem to him.

“And…? What d’you exactly want from me?” he asked curtly.

“Nothing in particular?” Yuusho answered, unfazed. “Just thought I’d let you know that Miyamae, your li’l buddy, is trying to rope the student council into something. That’s all.”

“No, hold on. Isn’t it *your* vice president who’s bringing this forward to some student assembly? Nonoa’s got nothing to do with that, doesn’t she?”

“I wonder~. Honestly… the very fact this is being escalated to a student assembly feels like it’s been orchestrated from the start.”

“You’re delusional,” Masachika spat, giving Yuusho a cold glare.

His theories now sounded completely baseless, bordering on being a full-blown conspiracy. Yet, Yuusho paid it no mind and continued.

“Delusional?” he scoffed. “Hardly. I mean, this whole student assembly thing in the first place is—”

“Yuusho-san…? Skipping out again instead of going to your piano club?” a cool voice rang out just then from down the hallway, and Yuusho spun around in a panic.

“S-Sumire-neesan…”

Turning to that direction as well, Masachika saw Sumire approaching with a sharp gaze, likely making her rounds as part of her disciplinary committee duties.

“Good day, Kuze-san.”

“Likewise. Keep up the hard work, Sumire-senpai,” Masachika called out to her, refraining from calling her Violet-senpai for once, cowed by the sheer aura she exuded.

She gave a small nod to him in response, before then turning her piercing gaze once again on Yuusho.

“Yuusho-san?” Sumire called out to him menacingly. “The piano club’s going through some difficult times right now, isn’t it? And yet here you are, the club president himself, wasting time by loafing about in a place like this?”

“N-no, it’s not like I’m skipping out or anything…”

“If standing around chatting in the hallway instead of going to your clubroom isn’t skipping, then what is?” Sumire asked, cutting down Yuusho’s excuse in one sharp blow, pinching his ear tightly. “You’re coming with me. Since you’re obviously so free, I’ll have you help with some disciplinary committee work.”

“Ow, that hurts! That hurts, Sumire-nee-san!”

“Right then, Kuze-san. I’ll be taking Yuusho here with me. Is that alright?”

“Go ahead, go ahead.”

“Ow! You’re gonna rip my ear off!”

“I won’t from just this much.”

Masachika waved half-heartedly, watching Yuusho go as he was dragged away by the ear—a scene straight out of an old school manga.

“Why does he kinda look happy about it…?” he then muttered under his breath.

There was probably only one reason for that, but saying it out loud was completely pointless. With a shrug of his shoulders, Masachika pushed the thought aside and turned back to his previous train of thought.

Nonoa instigating the light music club to snatch the piano club’s room, for it to only be a set-up to a student assembly…? I mean, at most—if it’s her—all she’d do is something that’d torment the piano club out of spite.

With that thought, Masachika felt a pang of guilt for suspecting a friend, even if for a slight moment.

Or rather, there was this other time I suspected Nonoa of something because of Yuusho’s accusations, and that turned out to be complete BS.

That incident, from when Alisa had gone to the infirmary with her, was something Masachika had thought was foul play—only to find out that Nonoa had just been accompanying Alisa. That moment of realization was still fresh in his memory, so given that, there was just no way Masachika could take Yuusho’s words seriously here.

Wait, Sayaka and Nonoa have been publicly recognized as being on Alya’s and my camp since the most recent end-of-term ceremony and school festival, right? Our reputations would seriously tank if Nonoa were to really do something awful and get exposed for it here… No, wait, I can’t even imagine her leaving any evidence that could trace things back to her in the first place…

The fact of the matter is, neither Masachika nor Yuki had ever once managed to dig up any solid proof for any of the underhanded things they'd suspected Nonoa had done. What's more, the very idea of Nonoa plotting something was almost entirely based on Yuusho's conspiracies in the present case. Either way, even if she were up to something, some dispute between the piano and light music clubs had nothing to do with an outsider like Masachika in the first place.

Rather, couldn't making me suspect Nonoa be Yuusho's whole scheme in the first place?

Now that he thought of it, that possibility was starting to sound more likely. But as Masachika began to mull over what Yuusho would even gain from all of that, he stopped himself.

Forget it, forget it. Thinking 'bout that's just all a waste of time. I'll just keep an eye out if anythin' sketchy happens.

With that, Masachika shoved Yuusho's story to the back of his mind and resumed walking, heading home.

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Meanwhile, at that very moment in a certain empty classroom, Nonoa—who'd just been the topic of conversation—and Ayano—having just finished her student council duties—stood face to face, alone.

"…So that's how it all is," Ayano explained. "Should Alisa-san win the election, Masachika-sama will return to the Suou family… It's what I have heard."

"*Hmm*~? That's great, ain't it?" Nonoa muttered her reply, having been informed by Ayano, who'd called her the night before, about Gensei's decision. "So? What 'bout you, Ayanono?" she then casually asked with her usual straightforwardness, raising one eye. "It's a wish you've mentioned before, 'bout Kuzecchi returning to the Suou family, amirite? Won't it make more sense to support him and Alissa in the elections instead, if it'll make that happen?"

“I am Yuki-sama’s partner and servant. I put Yuki-sama first above all else, and act for her sake,” Ayano answered Nonoa’s slightly probing question without even an ounce of hesitation, having likely already thought it through and reached a conclusion.

“*Hmm~?*” Nonoa gave her characteristically indifferent reply in response to Ayano’s usual composure and unwaveringly calm expression, “Is that really all there is to it?”

Yet, she raised that question quietly.

Ayano tilted her head slightly in response, revealing a flicker of confusion in the process, giving Nonoa her cue.

“Isn’t the truth that you actually hate it?” she stated matter-of-factly. “Everything’s going accordin’ to *Alissa’s* plans after all, y’know~?”

“What do you mean by that…?” Ayano asked in a wavering voice.

Whether her faltering tone was from the confusion of being told something so outrageous, or whether it was because the comment had simply struck a nerve, Nonoa didn’t seem to care either way. She spread her arms and smiled.

“Kuzecchi, Yukki, and Ayanono—the three always together since they were little. A world truly special, so precious, and irreplaceable to the girl named Ayanono above all else~” Nonoa spoke in a light, cheerful tone, as if she were singing. Pausing to smile sweetly at Ayano, who was now silently staring at her, she went on with the same carefree voice. “And then suddenly, an intruder barges in.”

Her words were nothing but ominous, yet delivered so brightly. They made Ayano’s shoulders twitch visibly. Sensing her unease, Nonoa pressed on with her attack.

“Said intruder became Kuzecchi’s partner, and Yuki’s rival, insertin’ herself between the two and taking up a huge space in both their hearts. And to top it all off, the wish that you’ve been holding onto for years, Ayanono—wanting Kuzecchi to return back home to the Suou family—is ’bout to be granted because of her, too~”

Without hesitation, without mercy, Nonoa stepped closer to Ayano, digging even deeper into her heart.

And maybe because she'd now been forced to confront a reality she had been trying so hard to avoid this whole while, Ayano's eyes visibly wavered, and she lowered her face as if trying to flee.

Unbothered, Nonoa stepped even closer, gently bringing her lips right next to Ayano's ear.

"You don't like it," she whispered that single phrase. "She's really just an eyesore to you deep down, isn't she? Alisa Kujou."

It was a question she had softly asked, as if she were gently nestling up to Ayano's heart, embracing it as if she understood and forgave all her feelings.

Ayano jerked back sharply right in that instant, her body bumping straight into the lockers at the back of a classroom, ringing out a loud clatter. A complete and utter blunder, thoroughly uncharacteristic for the usually silent and composed Ayano.

And that in itself had most likely shaken her even further as she stood frozen in place, leaning lightly against the locker. Taking advantage of this, Nonoa drew in even closer, placing her right hand over Ayano's left.

"You wanna go back to those days—those days when it was just the three of you—a peaceful and happy time *alone* with those feelings," she spoke gently to the girl who kept her head down. "You never wanted some intruder barging in, especially not if said intruder is on track to stealing your place."

"Stealing…? That's… not it…" Ayano tried to refute.

"Is it really not?" Yet Nonoa asked, killing all the little remaining strength of her already wilted resistance.

"……"

“Before the girl named Alisa Kujou appeared, the closest female to the boy named Masachika Kuze—excluding his li’l sister, Yuki Suou—was you. But now?” Nonoa asked once more to Ayano as she kept her head bowed deeply, before continuing. “And who brought him back to the Suou manor on the day of her birthday party? Was it you? No, right~?”

Her questions urged Ayano to think for herself, leading her to reach the definite answer on her own.

“And even with all your desperate persuasion, Masachika Kuze simply didn’t move,” yet Nonoa still stated the undeniable factual conclusion, as if to finish off the job. “The one who moved him was none other than Alisa Kujou.”

Ayano’s fingers could only tremble under Nonoa’s hand, who in turn traced her own gently along the former, as if to wrap around and entangle them.

“The one supporting the boy named Masachika Kuze right now isn’t you,” she continued. “And if that keeps up, the future you wish for—one where the three of you, *just* the three of you, could live happily ever after together—will ***never*** come.”

It was a declaration so cold and delivered with certainty.

Nonoa suddenly softened her expression right after.

“But it’s okay. I’m on your side, Ayanono,” she spoke in a gentle voice. “I’ll help you take hold of the future you wish for, with your own hands.”

In face of such words, Ayano, who’d been hanging her head low up to this point, finally looked up. Her wavering, unsteady gaze met Nonoa’s from a close range, with the latter meeting her with an incredibly benevolent smile.

“It’ll be okay, y’know~? There’s a way for the three of you to go back to how happy you once were together, just like before. And it’s a really simple, easy way too.”

“…There’s no such thi—”

“There is,” Nonoa declared clearly, raising a finger to her lips as she whispered quietly. “I’ll tell you how.”

She gave a smile.

A smile that bore the grace of a saint that gently embraced the ugliness to human nature, yet at the same time one that exuded a stark resemblance to that of a devil exploiting the weakness of man.

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Let's go back to a few days earlier, specifically to the piano club's room.

"Damn it! That bastard!" A sharp voice echoed through the nearly deserted room, a place which had become far less popular compared to a month ago.

Kicking at the floor with her indoor shoes and shouting profanities far removed from that of ladylike grace was none other than second-year girl and vice president of the piano club, Aoi Tsukamoto.

She was a rare exception in the piano club—a club where most members had been fans of Yuusho. She had no interest in the boy whatsoever herself, and had joined purely out of her desire to play the piano.

But it was precisely because of that sincerity and dedication toward the instrument of hers that she'd been half-forced to assume the position of vice president of the piano club. And yet, said club was now on the very verge of collapse. What's more, the light music club was even pressuring them to give up their room. As for the person who'd caused this mess—the club's president, Yuusho—he hadn't taken any action to address any of the issues whatsoever. No one even knew where he was. Given all the circumstances, it was only natural from her perspective to vent all her frustrations like this.

"That bald cunt! Damn baldy! Just die already! I hope your fucking fingers get crushed by the fallboard and you die!"

…Well, okay, that might've been taking things a bit too far.

In her defense, Aoi wasn't the type of girl who usually spouted such foul language—she just simply happened to be in the worst emotional state of her seventeen years of life right now.

And it wasn't that she was against the idea of switching clubrooms either. In fact, up until now, due to the sheer number of members (and because Aoi found Yuusho's entourage simply annoying deep down), the hardcore members of the club had been using the clubroom, while Yuusho and his entourage usually left to the music room. With now only four members actually left, said music room alone was more than sufficient from a purely practical standpoint.

Still, for Aoi, there was one reason—one very big one at that—why she simply couldn't give up this clubroom.

"If things keep going like this…!" Aoi squeezed her words out in pain through clenched teeth, turning her eyes toward the grand piano that sat at the back of the room.

The piano in question was a world-class grand piano, the kind coveted by pianists all over the world. It had been donated to the piano club from an alumnus who also happened to be part of the Raikokai. Simply purchasing the same model now would easily cost hundreds of millions of yen. It was simply something Aoi would never have had the chance to play if she hadn't come to this school, despite being from a relatively wealthy family herself.

In short, putting aside the cost entirely, to Aoi, this piano was something absolutely irreplaceable.

She had originally visited Seirei Academy during a previous cultural festival on a friend's invitation back in junior high, and it was there, by utter sheer luck, that she'd managed the chance to play on this very grand piano. Its tone had shook her to her very core back then, and it had completely overturned her understanding of what a piano simply was. She hadn't been able to get this piano out of her head from that day forward, and even gave up on taking the entrance exam for the music high school she had originally intended to apply to. Instead, she studied like her life depended on it to get into this school, despite not even being good at academics. All for the chance to play this piano once more.

And when that long-awaited dream finally came true, her hands finally being able to play it again for the first time in two years, she burst into tears of joy, not caring for who was watching. It had caused her great excitement, overwhelming her so much to the point where she couldn't even sleep that night.

Even when half the club's members quit a year later because Yuusho—a club destroyer in more ways than one—joined, she didn't. And though she was sick of all the girls who'd joined just to hang around Yuusho instead of caring about playing the piano itself, she still didn't quit. All because of this very piano.

And yet…

"Being demoted to an interest group's already a huge risk… If we lose the clubroom too, then there's no doubt that they'll take Stein-kun back…!"

By the way, Stein-kun was the name Aoi had arbitrarily given to this piano, and just to clarify from earlier, Stein-kun himself wasn't a donation. It had only simply been loaned to them. If the piano club were to lose its official club status and had to vacate the room, then it wasn't hard to imagine that its owner would come to reclaim it.

"What should we do…? What *can* we do…!?"

Basically, all they had to do was recover enough members before the deadline, but that was easier said than done. She wouldn't be having this whole problem if it were that easy in the first place, after all. Aoi had even already tried reaching out to as many people she could think of, but with the club led by Yuusho, someone whose bad reputation had spread across the entire school, no one was eager to join.

She had considered pressuring Yuusho to quit, allowing her to bring back more former hardcore members like her. But to her dismay, the two other remaining members were diehard followers of Yuusho's—true fans who still stood by him even after what had happened at the cultural festival. Those two would definitely not take it quietly if she'd tried to kick him out, and if she forcibly gave them all the boot, she'd be the only one left. Recruiting four more members on top of that was simply too high of a hurdle to clear.

There's just no time left either way…

Demotion to a mere interest group a month after falling under the minimum member requirement was a matter strictly dictated by school rules. In practice, though, the decision was typically finalized at one of the two inter-club meetings held each year. It was exactly why Aoi had assumed she still had a bit more time… That is, until that abrupt proposal came from the light music club's president.

"*Argh~, geeeeez!* Just what the hell am I supposed to do with just over a week left…!?"

Objectively speaking, even Aoi knew the light music club was in the right. Their proposal wasn't anything that went against school regulations, so there was simply just no valid argument Aoi could make. In short, she was completely cornered.

"*Arrrrggghh~, geez! ARRRRGGGHH, GEEEEZ!!!*"

And it was precisely because she understood how dire the situation was that Aoi could only stomp her feet in frustration and vent her irritation aloud.

"Excuse me."

"!"

But then, right at that moment, an unexpected visitor appeared. Aoi turned toward the voice, and her gaze was met with a girl she didn't recognize at the doorway—not a member of the piano club, but someone completely unfamiliar.

"…What do you want?" Aoi, probably still feeling awkward about her earlier crashout, answered curtly. "You're more than welcome if you're here to join, but if that's not it, can you please leave?"

However, the girl showed no sign of being bothered, instead closing the door behind her with a faint smile as she walked closer.

"You're Vice President Tsukamoto-san of the piano club, correct?" she asked.

"That's right, and you are?"

"Who I am doesn't really matter here, does it? What's more important is you've been asked to vacate this clubroom, correct?"

Aoi furrowed her eyebrows, having heard a complete stranger raise the very issue that had been weighing on her mind all this while. The matter of switching clubrooms had only been privately mentioned to her by the president of the light music club—hardly anyone else should've known about it. And if anyone did, they would surely be someone from within the light music club, and yet, Aoi had no memory of ever seeing this girl in the music room ever before.

Who is she…? She looks like she's probably a second-year judging by the color of her ribbon…

The girl in question had long, black glossy hair, paired with a strikingly beautiful face made even more eye-catching by her perfectly done makeup. If such a stunning girl really were in the same year as her, Aoi figured that she should've at least caught wind or heard some rumors about her, yet she had absolutely no clue as to who she was. Her identity was completely unknown to her, and it was precisely because she was so beautiful that not even hearing a single mention about her before made the whole situation seem all the more eerie.

"So what? Like I asked earlier, are you saying you're going to join the club? You're more than welcome if that's the case."

"I wouldn't mind if it's under certain conditions."

"Huh?" Aoi frowned, the girl's unexpected reply bringing more suspicion and confusion than joy.

The girl, however, simply smiled.

"As long as you're willing to go along with my proposal, Vice President-san, then I'll be glad to join the club. Even as a ghost member."

"What do you mean by that…?"

It sounded like nothing but a completely shady offer, but in her completely cornered and desperate state, Aoi couldn't help but listen to what sounded like a small sliver of hope. As if expecting this reaction, the girl giggled with ease.

"There's no need to be so wary. All I'm asking is that you call for a student assembly."

“A student assembly…?”

The unexpected phrase caught Aoi off guard, and she repeated it with deep suspicion.

It wasn’t as if she hadn’t considered that strategy as a last resort, but it was a hand she’d abandoned as it gave no chance of winning, no matter how she tried looking at it.

Because of course, as much as the light music club’s demands might seem high-handed, they weren’t unreasonable. Objectively speaking, a club being demoted to that of a mere interest group had no right to continue occupying a full-on clubroom. In fact, not wanting to vacate on her end was clearly unreasonable in this case. On top of that, thanks to Yuusho, the piano club had drawn massive discontent from a large portion of the student body. If the matter was brought to a student assembly for a vote, it was obvious which side would lose.

“It’ll be fine. You may not win, but as long as you do as I say, we can at least force a draw,” the mysterious girl told her.

“Huh? A draw?”

From an outrageous proposal to now incomprehensible talk, Aoi’s distrust only deepened. To begin with, votes called in student assemblies were unable to end in draws—another round of discussion would commence if a vote came out completely tied, followed by a second round of voting.

But even so, the girl wasn’t fazed at all by Aoi’s obvious and clear reaction, and spoke on, calm and composed.

“What if there was voter fraud?” she suggested.

“…Huh?”

“What if voter fraud were to happen, and it was determined that a fair vote had not taken place, leading to the votes being invalidated and the entire student assembly being disbanded without decision. Wouldn’t that be considered a draw?”

“…What are you even saying?” Aoi replied, practically questioning the girl’s sanity as she was left unable to fully grasp her true intent.

"Voter fraud *will* happen," yet the female declared with a bright smile.

"Again, what are you even—"

"Voter fraud *will* happen. All you have to do is point it out."

"....."

What did she mean by that? Voter fraud being inevitable in some student assembly that hadn't even been confirmed to happen in the first place? It was utter fortune-telling. A prophecy.

How incredibly stupid. Aoi snapped bitterly in her mind. *If she really could see the future, then she'd know I have absolutely no intention of raising this to a student assembly in the first place, wouldn't she? The fact that she's even come to ask proves—*

But right at that point, she widened her eyes in shock and dread.

She'd come to realize the hidden, intense malice behind the girl's words.

"What will you do?" the girl asked.

"....."

"As I said earlier, I can guarantee that your clubroom will not be taken from you as long as you follow my instructions, you know? I'm not asking for anything difficult—just call for a student assembly and point out the fraud. That's all," the girl smiled, knowing that Aoi had caught on, as well as knowing how she would respond.

"....."

Aoi understood the situation fully. This was a deal with the devil. Even if she accepted her offer and things went smoothly, there was no telling what kind of price would come later.

But... do I have any other choice? She asked that question to herself.

There was none. She knew that better than anyone.

Huffing in frustration, Aoi gazed at the piano behind her, agonizing fiercely for a dozen or so seconds.

"...Fine."

At last, she took the devil's hand.

Chapter 8 - The Virgin Mary, the Maid, and the Slit

Complacency is your greatest enemy. Every rose has its thorn. Keep your powder dry.

There are countless sayings that preach the concept of being alert, precisely when things are going well. It just goes to show how often people get caught off guard while at the peak of their success, and at the same time, it is a testament to the idea that, no matter how frequently they've been warned, humans are still creatures prone to complacency in the end. Furthermore, said complacency isn't often something people realize until it finally hits them more often than not.

Damn it...!

And by the time you've realized, it's already far too late.

Why hadn't he been more cautious? He should've known full well that this was reckless, yet he had convinced himself that he could handle it if he just kept the situation close at hand. An utterly fatal mistake. It was only now that all those retrospective regrets spun through Masachika's head pointlessly, with him lately feeling that he had become invincible.

Masachika was normally the type to hesitate and overthink *everything*, but ever since Alisa had taken his hand and pulled him forward, he'd been fully charging ahead with no signs of hitting the brakes.

And things had somehow gone well up until this point—absurdly well. The best things have ever been. He was finally able to have a heart-to-heart talk with his sister, he had eased some of the lingering tension with his mother, and had even achieved a solid outcome from negotiations with his grandfather—better than he had expected. On top of that, he had regained his ability to play the piano freely and peacefully, earning him high praise from the wind ensemble. As a result of that, he was steadily on track with fulfilling his promise to Elena, too.

Uoooooh! I've got no idea how this is all happenin' but I'ma see how far I can ride this waveeee~, he had practically thought, ending up in an unusually positive and confident state of mind.

Yet, it was exactly the kind of opening the devil had waited for.

I'll never again… ever let my guard down around this damn thing…

With clouded eyes, Masachika glared hatefully at the culprit, before collapsing to his knees.

And that culprit in question would strike again moments later, with it—a basketball—ricocheting off an opposing defender and striking square at Masachika's jaw, before falling and bouncing lightly on the gym floor.

Balls were, and always would be, Masachika's archenemy.

★·☆·★

"Got any headaches?"

"I do not."

"Feeling nauseous?"

"I do not."

"*Hmm~*, you might just have a mild concussion. Well, take the rest of the day off and rest in bed for now just to be safe. Keep an eye on how you feel. If nothing comes up, you're free to go home."

"Got it…"

"Let me know right away if you start feeling worse, okay?"

"Alright," Masachika answered, following the health teacher's (who was also the school nurse) instructions before pulling the curtain around the nursing bed and laying down on it while still his gym clothes.

In all honesty, the sheer dizziness—to the point of being completely unsteady—he'd felt right after collapsing had long subsided, and Masachika felt like he could readily return back to his classes without any issue. But even so, he chose to obediently follow the health teacher's instructions, simply because he was too embarrassed to face his classmates…

Like, man, that was seriously pathetic… So uncool, Masachika thought, squirming quietly on the bed as he recalled his earlier blunder.

Collapsing during PE and needing to be carried to the infirmary was nothing short of an incident. Yet, when it really came down to it, Masachika's case had only happened because of his own blunder—even if the ball had bounced off an opposing player in the first place. At this point, his only saving grace was that PE was held separately for boys and girls, so he could at least rest easy at the fact that the latter weren't there to witness the moment as it happened.

I would've died then and there from embarrassment if Alya had seen that… Haaaah*~, yep, it ain't great for mere humans like me to get too cocky, huh…? I mean, not that I think I was getting* too *full of myself, or anything*.

Even so, reflecting back on it now, it did feel like he'd been riding on this strange sense of feeling invincible. If that wasn't the case, then why the hell had he even tried dribbling a basketball—the exact kind of reckless act that usually only resulted in him with jammed up fingers?

Guess it's kinda like some drunk person not realizing they're smashed 'til they've sobered up… Oh well, not like I've ever been drunk before, so who knows~? Masachika reasoned with the thoughts that meandered throughout his mind, his mood plummeting fast, probably as a result of losing that unconscious feeling of being untouchable. *Ahhh~, shit. Starting to hate myself all a sudden. It's just* me *we're talking about here, after all…*

That all-too-familiar line of thinking had started to creep in again, and Masachika desperately fought to steer his thoughts elsewhere. But since it had been PE, he didn't even have his phone to distract himself with.

Can't be helped… Guess I'll just sleep.

Coming to that decision, Masachika then shut his eyes and focused on taking slow, steady breaths. Maybe because he was tired from all that exercise, his thoughts also gradually started to blur, and within a few minutes, he'd drifted off to sleep…

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Rustle, rustle, fidget.

Some time later, a noise from beyond the curtain stirred his consciousness.

"*Mm*…" Masachika let out a low groan as he stretched out on the bed, with a familiar face peeking through the gap in the curtain just moments later.

"Oh? Did I wake you up?"

"…Slit?"

"*Gah*, calling me *that* right after waking up… Ah, whatever, guess I'll let it slide," the handicrafts club member, who had always somehow tangled up with him, answered with a wry smile before Masachika could even muster a question. "Sensei's in a meeting, so I'm here on duty as a member of the health committee in the meantime. Just doing some cleaning while keeping watch."

"*Ahhh*, gotcha…"

"By the way, Kujou-san and two other guys dropped your stuff off a moment ago. They literally left right before I came in. Oh, the student council's apparently off today too."

"Ah, that so?" Masachika asked, following Slit-paisen's gaze and, sure enough, saw his bag and uniform placed by the side of the bed.

So, Takeshi and Hikaru, huh…? Wait, that means Alya probably knows too. Well, obviously… I mean, guess it's better than her staying around to look after me or anything.

Getting nursed over something this incredibly lame would've been far too humiliating for a guy. He could picture what had probably happened too. Alisa—the literal girl who'd visited him at home from when he had once gotten a cold—having probably suggested she'd stay and keep company without an ounce of hesitation…, only for Takeshi and Hikaru—most likely understanding Masachika's pride as fellow guys—to bring her back with them. Or maybe, Alisa just simply couldn't bring herself to declare and insist that she'd stay by his side in front of the two of them. Either way, Masachika was grateful.

"How're you feeling?" Slit-paisen asked, breaking him from his thoughts. "Sensei says you're free to head home if you're okay by the time they've come back."

"*Hmm~*… No, yeah, I've actually been totally fine for a while now…"

"*Ahaha*, you still look sleepy though… Go ahead and rest. I'll keep things quiet while I clean."

"I'll take you up on that…" Masachika answered in a half-drowsy mumble, before rolling over and sinking once more into sleep.

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On another note, today had been a day where Maria had been restless from the moment she woke up.

There was this sort of deep irritation embedded in her chest. It was an agitated sense of uneasiness, though when she tried to pin it down, she found that it wasn't exactly unpleasant either. This prickly sensation had, in fact, been building up over the past few days, and had now swelled to its absolute limit at last, becoming something that was now almost unbearable.

And it was a feeling Maria knew exactly what it was.

I'm feeling antsy!!!

Still, it wasn't something she could openly say out loud, and all she did was let out a sharp sigh through her nose.

Just hearing that declaration alone might make you think the thought didn't quite belong to someone like Maria. However, if you simply asked her what desire she was antsy for—what she was so desperately craving—then that impression would likely change.

Namely…

Hnnnnggghhhh~! I wanna spoil someone, pat them, and cuddle them tight~!

That sort of thing…

Maria's craving, in essence, was simply her desire to pamper. Her naturally strong maternal instincts, something that had always burned more than others', had nowhere to go lately and was building up as stress.

Of course, even though she vaguely said she wanted to spoil "someone," that didn't mean just *anyone* would do. Maria didn't like hopeless—frankly speaking—losers. She wasn't attracted to those who just wanted to be babied despite having not put any effort themselves at all. In fact, they pretty much repulsed her, and that was actually the troublesome part. Or rather, what she wanted specifically were people that *didn't* want to be babied.

She preferred those who didn't try to depend on others, those who worked hard while never showing their weaknesses to other people. Those were the type of people she loved pampering, specifically ones who were normally unable to bring themselves to be honest about wanting affection. And when they finally let themselves rely on her—the very moment they would reach out to confide in her comfort—her heart would then at last skip a beat.

"Fwaaaah~, am I being wanted right now!? Alright then, I'll pamper you as much as you'd like!!!" she'll then go, her happiness exploding completely.

It was something that was clearly the result of always receiving the cold shoulder from Alisa as they grew up, but well, that was that.

To top it all off, Maria also *really* loved physical affection. With a capital L. Just being close to someone she loved made her feel warm, at ease, and filled her heart full of happiness. She was thus naturally affectionate with her family, but now that she was at this age, simply clinging to her parents was far too awkward even for her. And as for her younger sister Alisa? Well, she was stubbornly cold to her as always…

That's how it basically was.

Ahhh, can't someone just let me spoil them already~…

So, carrying on with that rather hard-to-relate-to wish that had dug itself into her heart, Maria continued on with her day. But then…, during the short break between the fifth and sixth periods, an unexpected piece of news came flying right in.

"Eh!?" she unconsciously raised her voice as she read the message that had been sent in the student council group chat, quickly responding with a, "Sorry~, it's nothing," as her classmates turned her way, before then honing her eyes back onto her phone as she read the message over again.

Kuze-kun's injured and resting in the infirmary…?

The main point of the message, which Alisa had sent, was asking whether they should still hold today's student council meeting. They were already short on members on this particular day to begin with too. Yuki had an unavoidable matter she had to attend to, while Chisaki had a disciplinary committee meeting to attend. With Masachika now also being out, Alisa was asking what they should do.

Touya must have seen the message as well, as he shortly replied after. He informed the rest that, given there weren't any pressing matters today, they should cancel as long as there were no objections.

Responding with a cat sticker that said "OK," Maria felt her heart pounding hard…

Kuze-kun… Saa-kun in a weak state…?

What divine providence. Surely this was the will of some great higher power, telling Maria to go and take care of Masachika.

Wait for me, Saa-kun! I'll come and give you lots of gentle pats!

With her maternal instincts now surging to their peak, she fidgeted her way through the rest of her classes…, rushing straight to the infirmary the moment homeroom ended.

"Excuse me!" she called out, carried by her fluttering anticipation as she slid the door open to the infirmary…

"Maria-senpai…" Ayano turned around to her and gave a polite bow, her large eyes blinking in confusion. "Thank you for all your hard work today."

"Ayano-chan… Were you here to visit Kuze-kun, by any chance?"

"Yes. I thought I might take the opportunity to escort him home."

It wasn't something strange on Ayano's part. She used to be his maid, after all—something Maria had also come to learn after Masachika and Yuki had declared that they were siblings.

But still…

"Ayano-chan… I'm really sorry, but would you mind letting me take over today~?" she asked, with Ayano only returning a blank look of confusion. "I have something I want to talk about with Kuze-kun alone, just the two of us. So, please!"

Pleading that much, Maria pressed her hands together in front of her face.

But even so, for Ayano, this was also a rare and precious chance to serve her beloved master. It wasn't something she could just easily agree to, even if it was a request from her senior.

"I'm terribly sorry, but Masachika-sama is currently under strict bed rest. Can I please ask that you wait until tomorrow if it's an important matter?"

"*Y-yeeaaaah*. About that, I wasn't actually planning to talk about anything that serious… Um, it's just, well, Kuze-kun's always looking out for me, so I wanted to take care of him as a way of showing my thanks…" Maria confessed, allowing a glimpse of her true feelings to show through as she faced Ayano's logical and composed response.

And yet, that only made Ayano even more unwilling to back down.

“That is *my* responsibility,” she declared politely. “I simply am not allowed to trouble you with it, senpai.”

“Eh? *Buuuut*… you also look out for me all the time, Ayano-chan, so maybe you could leave it to me just this once…?”

“We have both helped each other, so there is no need for you to concern yourself over such an obligation like that, senpai.”

Though both spoke with polite tones, it was clear that neither of the two was willing to concede. Maria furrowed her brow with a pout, while Ayano maintained her unshakable poker face, as their eyes clashed midair with sparks practically flying all around…

Clap, then came a sound of hands slapping against knees, echoing across the room with the both of them turning toward the source.

There, they saw a female member of the health committee, who had silently been cleaning with her back to them up to this point, squatting down with her legs wide apart as she looked right up at them.

“As you will!” she spoke with an archaic tone. “I’ve got an apology I’ve gotta make to Kuze-shi[1] myself, so I’ll take care of things from here!”

“E-eh?” Maria called out in confusion. “Oh…, right, she’s from the handicrafts club…”

“Who gets to nurse Kuze-shi, hm? Well how ’bout we settle this with a little appeal showdown, eh?” Slit-paisen proposed.

“‘An appeal showdown…?” Maria and Ayano murmured, tilting their heads and sync as Slit-paisen smiled boldly.

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“*Nngh*…” Masachika groaned as he woke up, blinking slowly as he stared up at the ceiling.

What's the time…? Uhhh, I woke up earlier, but was it already after school then…? he thought, attempting to piece things together through the haze of sleep.

Sensing someone nearby, he looked toward the foot of the bed, freezing immediately when he saw who was there.

"Ah, g'morning, Kuze-kun," Maria greeted him.

"Good morning, Masachika-sama," Ayano followed suit.

"……"

Masachika couldn't even respond as he faced their greetings, as the ones standing there were—well, to put bluntly—a lady doctor dressed in a virgin-killer sweater and an angel in a mini skirt.

Ah, I see… I'm dreamin', huh? he concluded immediately, letting his head fall back onto the pillow.

But at that moment, the two girls who had been standing at the foot of the bed hurriedly moved to either side of him.

"*Ahh*, don't fall back asleep~! At least choose one of us first if you're going to~" Maria pleaded with him with her lab coat over her virgin-killer sweater, her cleavage showing deeply.

"Whom would you like to be nursed by, Masachika-sama?" Ayano—who wore a nurse outfit with a heart-shaped keyhole cutout over the top of her chest, accompanied by some small white wings on her back—asked, leaning in from the right side with her usual emotionless face.

What even was this situation? It was a predicament far too absurd for Masachika's freshly-woken-up brain to process, and he could only lie there, frozen for several seconds…

"Yeah, nah, I just want sensei[2] to look me over normally," he then replied with a brutally honest comment.

It was only after he saw Maria's eyes sparkle and Ayano's widening in shock that he realized how misleading his phrasing had been.

“Really!? *Yaaaay~!* M’kay then, let’s get you back to la-la land, *okaaaay~*?”

“N-no, wait, I meant sensei as in the actual health teacher who works here!” Masachika hastily tried to clear up the misunderstanding as Maria had begun to lean over the bed, yet not a single word entered her ear.

She was simply overcome with her maternal instincts.

Masachika tried to sit up in reflex as she propped up her elbow on the bed, yet before he could, Maria had already swiftly nabbed the pillow from beneath his head, slipping it on her own lap instead. She then pressed his shoulder down and forced him onto said pillow in one swift motion. It was so smooth that all Masachika could do was blink in surprise.

Just then, the bed creaked on the opposite side, and an arm reached out from the right. Grabbing his head and shoulder, it forcibly tugged him back with a strong pull.

“You mustn’t, Maria-senpai! Masachika-sama clearly said he wanted sensei, the health teacher, not you!” Ayano said strongly, pulling Masachika’s head onto her own lap.

Yet, all that did was probe Maria for a reaction, and she instantly reached out and tugged his head back toward her.

“No *waaay~*! He literally said sensei just now!” She insisted like a child, still misunderstanding that Masachika was referring to her as a so-called doctor.

“Exactly! That is the misunderstanding I was trying to address!” Ayano raised her voice uncharacteristically in a rare show of emotion.

The both of them continued to grab at Masachika’s shoulders and head, leaning in close as they locked eyes while struggling for possession.

And the result of all that? A boob sandwich, whether intentional or not.

Squeeze-squeeze, came a firm sensation pressing against him from the right. Mush-mush, came a plushy squish from his left. He was utterly and completely enveloped in two unique soft-sensations from both sides as they competed for dominance.

Mm-hmm, you guessed right. As expected, Masachika's male instincts naturally gravitated toward the female "doctor" on his left.

Wait! Th-they're not wearing anything under here, aren't they!? he suddenly realized, feeling the absurd softness of their chests pressing against his cheeks and ears.

He recalled what had been bothering him since earlier, namely the fact that the keyhole cutouts on their outfits had been positioned in a way where their underwear would be clearly visible if they had any on. He now realized his suspicions were absolutely correct.

Hold on, something's been brushing against my skin this whole time since earlier too… Hm? What is it, some hole? A slit?

At that word, it was only then did Masachika finally remember that there had been someone else in the room earlier. Namely, someone who could've easily caused all of this in the first place.

"Slit!!" he yelled out.

"Yes yes, sorry to keep you waitin'~!" a voice responded.

Pushing aside the curtain at the foot of the bed appeared none other than Slit-paisen, who was for some reason dressed in a ring girl outfit.

She looked to have just finished changing and had now showed up while still checking out her outfit, all to only stop dead in her tracks upon seeing the scene on the bed.

"*Weeeew*… This has turned into a situation way beyond what I'd imagined," she said. "Got yourself into a pretty interesting *yet* enviable situation, huh? Hey, lemme get in on this."

"What's with that outfit?" Masachika quipped.

“Oh, I was actually originally gonna dress up as a referee, but like…, we didn’t have any normal ones, as expected. So, figured I’d be a pervy one instead.”

“Why the ref gig in the first place?”

“Um, to officiate this battle between women?” Slit-paisen answered matter-of-factly.

“What’s that even supposed to mean?” Masachika continued with his stream of questions, showing how completely lost he was.

Deciding to ignore him in spite of it, Slit-paisen cleared her throat once before then calling out to Maria and Ayano.

“Now now, break it up for a moment, break it up. Real women don’t fight with their arms. Right then, perfect,” she announced, content with having reset the air. “The first round will be decided with… their laps!”

“What’s with your energy here?” Masachika remarked, unable to stop himself from commenting on Slit-paisen’s bizarre hype.

“Right then, first up, Kunojou!”

“Why the shikona[3]?” Masachika threw yet another retort.

Yet despite all this, both girls obeyed this quote unquote referee, and once again, his head was placed onto Maria’s lap.

“……”

“Next up—Kiminoshima!”

Then came Ayano’s lap.

Given it looked like he was supposed to judge and choose a winner from the two, Masachika reflected on how both their laps felt, comparing the feeling on the back of his head…

Honestly, the only real difference was the width and height, but… I guess Masha-san’s was a li’l softer. But in terms of where my head actually was…

“Well then, Kuze-danna[4]! What’s your verdict!?”

“Ayano.”

“Victory to Kiminoshima!”

“*Eeeeehhh~!?* Kuze-kun??? *Whyyyyy!?*” Maria protested.

“No, um…”

It really wasn’t about how it felt if you asked him why. More than anything, it was because the sight right in front of his eyes from when he’d laid down on Maria’s lap had been far too dangerous. Sweaters on busty women should be outlawed—they allow you to make out their proportions way too clearly.

“Now then, moving on: the sleeping with her contest!”

“Huh, there’s a second round?”

“Kunojo!” Slit-paisen announced, with Maria laying down on Masachika’s left immediately after, gazing at him with a gentle, loving smile.

“……”

“Kiminoshima!” Slit-paisen came again, with Ayano quietly lying down on his right and simply staring at him, her face as expressionless as ever.

“……”

“Your verdict!”

“Ayano,” Masachika answered again without hesitation.

“*Whyyyy!~*” Maria cried in protest yet again.

“No, well…”

Why, you ask? His field of view; you can guess the rest.

Having someone lying down next to you in *that* kind of outfit naturally drew your eyes straight down. It was unavoidable.

Like seriously, asking me to stay calm in front of some lady doctor in a virgin-killer sweater is just plain impossible, Masachika contemplated, staring straight into the distance as Maria's face crumpled.

"What is it about me that you don't like…, Kuze-kun?" she asked with a voice that sounded like it was on the brink of breaking down into tears.

"*Hueh!?* No, u-um…" Masachika flailed, caught off guard by her unexpectedly serious reaction before glancing toward Ayano and Slit-paisen. He then leaned in close to Maria's ear, raising a hand to the side of his mouth as he whispered in a hushed tone. 【You're just a little too sexy; I can't relax.】

He was then pulled into a crushing embrace at the very next moment, with Maria's arms looping around the back of his neck in less than a second.

"*Ahh*, thank goodness! *Geeeez~*, you should've just said so if that's how it is!" she sang out.

"Don't go doing this with that outfit thoooouuuugh*!?!?"* Masachika let out a desperate scream, with it sounding more like a groan to everyone else with how muffled he was as the fabric pressed down on him.

Wait, my nose's in the cutout here! Gaaaah! *Your face really sinks in differently when she's not wearing a bra!*

As Masachika continued to let out desperate screams inwardly, someone suddenly grabbed his shoulder from behind.

"Maria-senpai! *I* won this round!" Ayano declared loudly as she yanked him backward. "Masachika-sama needs to rest in complete stillness!"

Pull, tug, yank… Yep, Maria wasn't letting go at all…

Ayano desperately continued to pry Masachika free from Maria, an action so hypocritical to her belated, yet obvious, statement. But in the struggle, she herself ended up with her body pressed against his back, and Masachika was now once again sandwiched by boobs—front and back this time.

Hmmm~? So this *is the boob pillow Yuki's so fond of, huh~? How erotic…*

That thought ran through his mind as he mentally withdrew from reality, but the truth of the matter was that Masachika was actually in a serious pinch.

His nose, mouth, and cheeks were all completely smothered in softness. He literally couldn't breathe.

"No seriously, just switch places with me already," Slit-paisen joked sarcastically.

She then took out her phone and started to snap photos rapidly without even a trace of hesitation, showing no signs of helping to stop the chaos, in spite of whether she understood Masachika's predicament or not. As she aimed her lens at him, Masachika's right arm—stretched out as if seeking for help—eventually flopped limply to the bed with a plop.

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"*'Kaaaaay,* you two~? It's 'bout time to let Kuze-shi go… He might actually die if you keep that up…" Slit-paisen eventually called out—now with mild exasperation—as she saw the limp, completely silent Masachika.

He was laid between Maria, who was holding onto him so tightly with hearts practically flying off from her head, and Ayano, who continued to cling onto him from the other side with an expressionless yet desperate face. It was then that a voice approaching from the hallway reached her ears.

Ah, shit.

Hastily drawing the curtain open, she glanced toward the clock. It was currently three minutes before the time the health teacher had told her she'd return.

Shit I'm definitely getting scolded if I get caught in this! she thought as she looked down to her outfit, accompanied by a sharp sense of danger that shot up her spine.

But alas, it was already too late.

"*Eep!*" Slit-paisen jolted, catching sight of the health teacher's profile through the window on the door, her eyes flying open wide in alarm.

Fortunately, the health teacher looked to be in a deep conversation with a student she'd been walking with, showing no signs of entering the room just yet.

Wh-wh-wh-what do I do!? Uhhh, uhhh…!

Her change of clothes was on the next bed over. She could certainly attempt some mad dash, dive into it, and yank the curtain shut, but the risk was just way too high.

Besides, I'll really be toast here if they call out to me while I'm changing! Arghhh…, she racked her head in pure desperation, then looked over at Maria who was still on the bed, striking an idea.

"W-w-wait! Kujou-senpai! Lend me that coat for a sec!" she called out.

"Eh, *eeeeh*?" Maria let out a confused tone.

Without waiting for a proper response, Slit-paisen then yanked the lab coat off from Maria and threw it over her ring girl outfit—which exposed her midriff—buttoning it all the way to the top.

Mm, maybe this'll pass? Yeah, I think I can pull this off!

Forcing herself to accept this half-baked plan of hers, she then peeked through the gap in the curtain to check the situation outside again, then bolted over to the next bed.

Diving straight into the half-open curtain, she snatched up their three sets of clothes and belongings, shoving them under the curtain to the next bed.

"Sorry! I'll stall sensei, so hurry and get changed!" she called to the others through the curtain, just as the health teacher finally wrapped up their conversation and entered the infirmary, waving goodbye to the student she had been with.

Immediately then seeing Slit-paisen in a lab coat after, they froze for a moment and furrowed their brows.

"...Why the lab coat?" they asked.

"Ah, no, it's just that—as a member of the health committee—I thought I'd try to look the part!"

"*Haaaah*," the health teacher sighed at Slit-paisen's stumbled explanation. "I see..."

"Anyway, sensei! I noticed something a little concerning while I was cleaning. Can I show you it?"

"Eh? Well... I suppose so?"

"Yes, over here by this shelf..." Slit-paisen pushed forward on with momentum alone, leading the health teacher over to a shelf far from the bed as she stalled for time as hard as she could, her brain running at full speed.

"*Eep!?*" then came ringing Masachika's bizarre, high pitched yelp from behind the drawn curtain, giving her a pretty good idea of what had just happened.

Ah, geez... Wait, isn't it usually the girl who'd make that noise in this kinda situation?

"Kuze-kun? What's wrong?" the health teacher called out.

"...No, sorry, it's nothing," Masachika answered in a voice that sounded like he was desperately trying to suppress himself.

It feels like... doesn't Kuze-shi owe me at least one lunch at this point? Slit-paisen thought to herself in response with quiet conviction.

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I'll never forgive you, Slit... Masachika hurled a silent curse in his heart as he recalled the face of the female student who'd brought about a situation reminiscent of the "summer uniform changing incident," only to leave it all off with a shoulder pat, a thumbs-up on her way out, and a "Not a bad perk, huh, boy?"

He wanted to yell at her to try being in his shoes at the time, to be the one who still had to walk home with the other two afterward.

Nevertheless, Masachika's mind returned to the present.

"No, really, I usually just focus on blocking the opponent's shots, y'know?" he recounted today's blunder in a slightly exaggerated, humorous way. "But today, right after catching the ball I'd blocked, I was like, 'Huh? Ain't the diagonal run kinda open here? I can make it!' for some reason. So I tried to dribble for once and, well, this was the result."

"Oh dear me~, that sounds rough, doesn't it~?" Maria smiled and nodded along…

"You good with ball games or anything like that, Masha-san?"

"Ah, *hmm*. Well, let's see~… I'm not that good, but… I do like sports, I guess?" she gave her answer, albeit only after blushing a little and quickly averting her gaze after Masachika turned toward her.

It was a sequence of events that had been going on for quite a while now, and her uncharacteristically shy demeanor was throwing off Masachika's rhythm.

"*Ohhhh~?* By the way, what do you like in PE?" he followed up with another question in spite of this.

"*Hmm,* let's see~… Long-distance running?"

"Long-distance running!?"

"It feels like a big game of tag; isn't it pretty fun that way?" Maria explained, still faced forward even as she did, never once making eye contact.

Yet, it was *because* he noticed how awkward she was acting that Masachika didn't let the conversation drop. He simply knew that a painful silence would ensue if he did. Plain as day.

Why's she so embarrassed here…? She wasn't this *shaken back then, during that whole summer uniform thing… No, I guess I really can't lump this in with that, huh?*

Whether or not she was wearing anything on top *did* make a huge difference, after all. But even then, that didn't change the fact that she hadn't looked all this shaken from the moment she was *actually* seen…

No, okay, I guess her not being flustered now would be weirder… But man, it's really hard to tell in Ayano's case with her usual blank look… Masachika thought, noticing his childhood friend—who was one step behind the two and quietly listening—looking as composed as ever.

"There is nothing for which Masachika-sama should apologize," she had even calmly replied when he had apologized earlier, showing no outward cues of embarrassment or shyness whatsoever.

But still…, she seemed weirdly stubborn just now—or rather, she was strangely showing her emotions… She definitely lost her composure there or something.

Thinking back on it now, Maria had also been acting a little out of control. She basically hadn't even tried to hide her feelings for Masachika…

…No, if I'm being real then it's probably all 'cause I've been so damn wishy-washy with her, Masachika thought as he felt a wave of self-loathing wash over him.

"I want you to face Alya-chan's feelings first." Those were the words that Masachika had been leaning on too much, using it as a convenient excuse to put off any proper response to the feelings that Maria had openly shown to him.

So in other words, could it be that Maria going off the rails today was due to the fact that he kept making her wait for so long…?

…Yeah, it is, Masachika followed that line of thought, coming right to a decision. *I gotta stop relying on her forgiveness and running from facing things head-on.*

He already had his fair share of that same type of regret when it came to his little sister. He would face Alisa's feelings, sure, but he wouldn't use that as an excuse in putting off facing Maria's for any longer. That was the decision he had come to right now.

Yeah, that's right. I'm all in—it's go time. Courage blazing, invincible mode activate, he steeled his resolve, rallying the sense of omnipotence that had withered from his body after being hit by that basketball.

"Thanks for seeing me off~. You two stay safe getting home too, okay?~" Maria gave her goodbyes, waving as she stepped into the entrance of her apartment building.

But just as she was about to disappear…, Masachika stepped forward, taking a big gulp.

"Um, Masha-san!" he called out to her, chasing after Maria into the entrance way, prompting her to spin around with a surprised expression. "Um, about that promise to go on a date with you from back at the sports festival…"

"*A-ahhhh~*, that? That's all fine now," Maria told him, looking a bit awkward as she glanced up and to the side with a small laugh, completely bringing Masachika's momentum to a halt.

"Huh…?" he stood there, confused.

"I had been thinking about how a date isn't something you're supposed to force onto someone… I don't want to trouble you, Kuze-kun, so it's fine now."

"Ah, is that… so…?"

"*Mm*," Maria nodded with an apologetic smile.

Her expression, with her brows slightly lowered, gave off the air of intense maturity, as if she was used to holding herself back painfully.

Ah… She's just like Yuki, the thought instantly struck Masachika at the sight.

And knowing that he was the one causing her to make that kind of face, Masachika was unable to stand it anymore.

"Understood," he nodded once, before speaking clearly to the downcast Maria. "Then, let me ask you again."

“Eh?” Maria looked back up with a startled expression, completely caught off guard.

“Masha-san,” Masachika continued with a resolute tone as he met her eyes. “Please go on a date with me on December 25th—the day after the closing ceremony.”

His request sent Maria’s eyes wide in disbelief, to the point that they almost popped right out…

“Yes! I’d love to!” she leapt at him right in the next moment, wrapping her arms around him tightly.

And then, as she pressed her cheek against Masachika’s, Maria slightly pulled away and whispered into his ear.

“Sorry, okay? I was a little awkward just now, wasn’t I?”

“Huh? Ah, no, I mean… I think it wasn’t really something you could help, so…”

“Nnn-no, that’s not it. Um, you see…” she started, laughing shyly by his ear as she whispered in a voice thick with warmth. “You spoke to me in Russian back at the infirmary, didn’t you? It sort of made me recall the past and… got my heart pounding like crazy.”

Her breath was heated as it brushed against Masachika’s earlobe, and immediately after, a kiss even hotter than that pressed against his cheek.

“!?”

“*Mwah*…” came the soft sound of a kiss as Maria’s lips pulled away, coming at the same time as she released him from her embrace.【Well then, see you, Saa-kun! I’ll be looking forward to it!】

With that, she ran off with a bright, free, childlike smile. Masachika could only stand there in a daze, mesmerized by her fleeting figure… It was only until a few seconds later that he snapped back to himself and quickly turned around.

He let out a sigh of relief upon seeing that Ayano wasn’t visible, blocked from view by the automatic doors at the entrance.

Thank god… I'd have had a helluva time explaining if she'd seen that just now.

Whether it was because of the now fleeting anxiety of not wanting to be caught, or whether it was because of Maria's actions, Masachika's body had started to rapidly burn up; he started to sweat buckets. Fully aware of this, Masachika grabbed the collar of his uniform and started to fan himself in a hurry, before then checking his face using the front camera on his phone.

Alright…, no visible kiss marks or anything… Phew! Calma, calma, Masachika chanted to himself like a mantra, composing himself.

Judging that he could act normal again after about ten seconds, he stepped out of the entrance and headed over to Ayano.

"My bad; kept you waiting."

"Not at all. Please don't worry about it," Ayano responded in a tone the same as always, not showing even the slightest signs of nosiness even though she must've had some questions about why her master had suddenly run off after their senior.

"…Let's head home," Masachika suggested.

"Yes."

As they made their way back, he glanced at Ayano from the side.

Figures… She's pretty much no different from usual.

And yet, despite that usual attitude of hers, Masachika couldn't help but sense a strange discomfort, almost as if he could feel that something bad was about to happen soon. It was almost entirely an intuition molded from their many years together, but… it just felt like she was hiding something behind that trademark expressionless face, or holding something back… That was the sense he got.

"Ayano," Masachika eventually decided to call out to her.

"Yes."

"What happened?" he came to a halt and asked Ayano directly.

It was a question based solely on the assumption that something was up, yet asked with so much conviction that it made Ayano instantly look up directly at her master.

"There is something you once told me, Masachika-sama," she eventually spoke up in a calm yet resolute tone after a brief silence. "That you wanted me to be Yuki-sama's strongest ally."

"Hm? Ah."

"They're words I still carry in my heart and act accordingly on."

"……"

It was a firm declaration of resolve, and yet at the same time, her way of rejecting him.

So… that means she can't talk about it to me since I'm an opposing candidate, huh?

Understanding the strong will she carried in her few words, Masachika smiled a little sadly.

"I see… Got it."

"…I'm very grateful for your understanding."

"Nah, it can't be helped if that's how it is. It's tied to your values as a servant, after all," Masachika reassured her as he gave her an equally solacing pat on the shoulder. He then started to walk again, switching to a teasing tone as if to change the mood. "Ah, but~, just 'cause you're her servant don't mean you gotta do everythin' she says, m'kay~? Don't feel like you gotta go along with all of Yuki's otaku antics: you don't have to meet all her crazy demands from A to Z, got it?"

"My master's joy is my joy. There's nothing I would consider unpleasant."

"…Seriously? Like, I'm worried your sense of normal's all messed up because of her… I mean, you even wore that cosplay outfit that deeply showed your cleavage today without hesitation…"

"Deep, you say?"

“Yeah, see? Your sense of what’s normal’s all off. Like, you’ve become less bothered with showing more skin, haven’t you?”

“I have never exposed my skin to any man other than Masachika-sama, so I do not believe it is an issue.”

“N-no, that ain’t the point here… Or is it? Wait, no no, don’t do that to me either, okay? At least pretend to be bothered!”

“There’s nothing I need to hide from Masachika-sama.”

“You should actually hide some stuff from me… Wait, I feel like we’ve had this exact convo before…”

The two continued on with their usual back-and-forth, which felt somewhat off-kilter, yet still largely familiar and easygoing.

But even so, regardless of that, Masachika still couldn’t shake a subtle ominous sense of discomfort in Ayano’s demeanor, something he felt was somehow different than usual.

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“……”

Having escorted Masachika home and returning to the Suou manor via the Suou family car, Ayano sat alone in her room, staring quietly at her phone.

Yes, this is… all for Yuki-sama’s sake, she repeated the thought to herself, trying to convince her heart.

After several rounds of hesitation, Ayano finally made the call.

“Hello, Ayanono~?” a voice finally answered, following a few rings of the tone, gentle and relaxed. *“What’s up, calling this late at night?”*

“I apologize for the late hour, Nonoa-san. Um…” Ayano started, pausing to wet her lips with her tongue as she steeled herself with resolve. “Regarding the other day, I would like to hear the details about how I can obtain the future I desire…”

[1]: “氏” (-shi) is an honorific usually used in formal speech used to refer to someone you’ve never actually met. It’s normally only used in academic journals or legal documents. Slit-paisen is obviously using it in a sarcastic/comedic tone here.

[2]: People in Japan often also refer to doctors as sensei, not just teachers. In this case, Masachika was referring to the school nurse/health teacher that had originally attended to him, but given the context and Masha’s outfit, she thought he was referring to her.

[3]: Read up to “Kiminoshima” first and then come back to this TN.

四股名 (shikona) are sumo ring names. They feature the character “ノ/の” (difference is katakana vs hiragana, with the former being used here), a possessive particle that means “of” or “belonging to” in English. It is used to connect two parts of a name to give a more poetic meaning rather than a direct meaning, almost like it’s telling a small story.

For example, in this case, the characters in Kimishima, 君嶋, literally mean lord (君) and island (嶋), giving the meaning “Lord’s Island.” Putting this character between them to give 君ノ嶋, connecting the two and making it more poetic, now makes it mean something like “The island of the Lord” in English.

Similarly, the characters in Kujou, 九条, literally mean nine (九) and strip (条), and come together to mean “Ninth Street” (with strip referring to anything long and narrow such as roads or lines, hence street). Connecting the two gives you 九ノ条. It’s albeit harder to come up with a translation for this in English (compared to Ayano’s surname for example), but I’ve come up with “Path of the Ninth Street.” I dunno, at this point, something else fucking autistic/chuunibyo sounding that carries the same meaning can work.

[4]: An old fashioned honorific used to refer to an honorable person or master. Deadass wanted to localize this to “the honorable Kuze” but, like, it’d call for inconsistency since I’ve virtually always been foreignizing honorifics (since basically all of them aren’t localizable to an extent where their quirks aren’t lost like this one).

Chapter 9 - The Curtain Rises

"The vice president of the piano club has submitted a request to the student council," Touya announced as soon as the student council meeting began.

Ah, that… Masachika thought with furrowed brows. *The thing Yuusho was talking about, huh…? 'Bout how Nonoa's plotting something, or whatever.*

Recalling Yuusho's completely baseless accusation, Masachika could only twist his mouth bitterly.

I get he hates Nonoa that *much, but he's seriously out of line… I mean like, going out of his way to say that to* me*, someone who's supposed to be her friend? The nerve of the guy.*

As Masachika grew increasingly irritated with Yuusho, Alisa posed a question to Touya.

"What was their request about?" she asked.

"That's the thing… So it looks like the piano club will be demoted to an interest group, due to falling below the minimum number of members as per the school rules. And at the same time, they've also apparently been asked to exchange clubrooms with the light music club. Their request is to put the matter to a vote with the student assembly."

"The light music club, huh?"

"Yeah… Interest groups don't have rights to clubrooms, and just considering the number of members between the two groups is enough to make the light music club's request only natural… But then again, looking from the piano club's point of view, being kicked out of their long-established clubroom's pretty hard to accept…" Touya reasoned as such, completely understanding the light music club's request on a rational level, while also sympathizing emotionally with the piano club's pushback.

He folded his arms with a troubled look.

“No use worrying about it,” Chisaki then gave his arm a light slap in encouragement, sitting diagonally across from him. “All we can do is run the student assembly fairly now that a request has been submitted.”

“Chisaki…” Touya called out to her, almost slipping off his chair to her slap before nodding deeply at his girlfriend’s words of support. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry ’bout that, guys. Chisaki’s right, regardless of what it concerns, all we can do is carry out our duties in managing the student assembly dutifully.”

“““““Yes,””””” the remaining council members responded in unison, hearing the words of their president and vice president.

Buoyed by their reply, Touya regained his focus and looked down at the request form.

“Right, the meeting will be held the day before the piano club’s dissolution as a club is finalized, so… this Thursday. Yeah, honestly, I wish they’d submitted it with more time to spare…”

“Maybe they were doing everything they could ’til the last moment to avoid being disbanded? Like desperately trying to recruit more members, I guess?” Chisaki suggested. “And when that didn’t work, they submitted the request.”

“Ah, so that’s it, huh? That’s right, it was something that could’ve been settled with just recovering their number of members… Oh well, that’s that. Now, as for the division of responsibilities…”

“Um, excuse me, Prez,” Yuki spoke up at that moment. “I actually have an unavoidable matter at home the day of…”

“Hm, is that so?”

“I sincerely apologize… I’ll take charge of creating our PR newsletter and the announcements during the lunch broadcast in exchange.”

“That’ll be a huge help. Sorry for putting those on you on such short notice, but I’m counting on you.”

“No, please don’t worry about it. I can make the PR newsletters quickly if I use some past templates,” Yuki accepted her tasks with a smile, with Masachika quietly raising his hand the moment after.

“Um, Prez? I know it’s kinda hard to say this after that, but… I also have practice with the wind ensemble on that day,” he explained.

“Ah, no, I already figured you wouldn’t be able to join, Kuze. Don’t worry ’bout it,” Touya reassured Masachika. “Or rather, given it’s the piano club petitioning, it’s probably best for you to not participate in the first place, given they probably have some grudge against you.”

“*Ahh~*, that’s true, ain’t it…?”

It was none other than Masachika who defeated Yuusho in their piano showdown, and that had led to the piano club’s downfall. Participating in a student assembly that was meant to decide the club’s future would easily provoke unwarranted suspicion or resentment from the piano club—the very party petitioning the issue.

Hmm, I actually initially thought I’d join in case there was the slightest chance of Nonoa doing something, but… he thought. *If we’re trying to avoid as much trouble as we can, then it’s definitely safer for me to sit this one out. Besides, Elena-senpai said I’ll definitely have to show up since we’ll be discussing the piano part during Thursday’s practice anyway.*

Though a little uneasy, Masachika nodded in agreement with Touya’s words.

“Sorry for that. I’ll still help out with the prep as much as I can,” he assured.

“Yeah, counting on you. Is everyone else good to go? The student assembly won’t be using a show-of-hands to vote this time, by the way. They’re apparently requesting we do a red-and-white ballot instead, so we’re gonna need more people to help out than usual…”

“Oh my, a red-and-white ballot?” Yuki raised her voice, sounding intrigued, all the while Maria tilted her head.

“What’s that?” she asked in confusion. “Having them raise flags instead of their hands?”

"Nope, that's not it… The audience is given red and white balls in advance, and they're supposed to put them into a box to cast their vote. White means you support the proposal, red means you oppose it… It's a method used to ensure you have a strict count of the votes, you see. It definitely takes more time compared to a normal show-of-hands, though, so it's not really used in assemblies with a large turnout…"

"*Ooooh~?* Is that so?" Maria exclaimed in excitement. "In other words, you're saying the piano club thinks it's going to be a close call?"

"…That might be the case," Yuki nodded after a short pause, but Masachika, who understood the real reason, bickered silently in his heart.

Or maybe they just don't trust the student council with counting the votes properly, he thought.

A simple show-of-hands made it hard to see exactly how many people had voted for what, so technically, if they really wanted to, the student council members in charge of counting could easily fudge the numbers. In that sense, you could take this request from the vice president of the piano club as a sign of distrust toward the student council.

Yeeeah… Seems all the more clear that I really shouldn't attend this one, Masachika mulled over the thought as the other student council members began to speak up one after another.

"I can be there," Chisaki chimed. "Is it okay if I do the whole crowd monitoring thing again, like always?"

"Yeah, counting on you. We definitely won't have any rowdy students if you're watching the seats, Chisaki. It'll really help."

"I'm good to go as the secretary as usual, right?" Maria asked.

"That's fine. In that case… I'll ask li'l sis Kujou and Kimishima to handle the voting. That includes overseeing the process and counting the votes," Touya told them.

"There's also the job of handing out the balls to the attendees at the entrance, Prez," Yuki pointed out.

"Ah, that's right. Thanks, Suou."

“Not at all.”

“I have no objections to doing that myself,” Touya said.

“Certainly,” Yuki replied in a polite tone.

“Hold on a sec, Touya,” Chisaki then spoke up. “What about sound and lighting?”

“Let’s borrow a few people from the drama club for that. That’ll let us keep two of ours to handle the voting since it’s a pretty heavy job.”

As the discussion progressed without a hitch, everyone’s role for the day had quickly been settled.

“Right, moving on to preparations for the actual day…” Touya shifted the conversation to the next topic.

Just then, a thought occurred to Masachika.

Should I at least give Alya a heads-up that there’s a chance that Nonoa might be up to something…? he thought, chewing over the idea for a few seconds before reconsidering. *No, it really is just Yuusho being delusional in the end… Better not say anything that’ll make Alya start doubting Nonoa’s character.*

Thinking of his partner, someone who had yet to witness Nonoa’s more dangerous side, Masachika chose to remain silent… His choice had been made.

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“That’s great, so it worked out, huh? Yeah… it’ll be okay, trust me, alright? I told you, didn’t I? That I’m on your side, Ayanono… *Fufu*, thanks. Right, talk to you later~,” Nonoa spoke in a gentle voice full of empathy as she laid on her bed in her room.

Despite her tone, she had ended her call with Ayano with a completely blank expression.

“No, seriously…, you’re really creepy to watch, aren’t you? I have no idea how you’re able to pull off that kind of voice while keeping a completely straight face,” a comment that came from the middle of a room, accompanied with a wry smile.

Nonoa turned her eyes toward its source.

Sitting on a beanbag was a girl in a Seirei Academy uniform. She was the very person who had incited the piano club’s vice president, Aoi, into calling for a student assembly. Her name was Miyabi Shikumagawa.

“It was just a phone call; not like I had to make a nice expression, right?” Nonoa argued.

“It’s not like you have to, but… I feel like people normally match their gentle tone of voice with how they smile, don’t they?”

“That so? I’m not normal, so I wouldn’t know,” she explained nonchalantly[1], prompting an even deeper wry smile from Miyabi.

“So then, are the preparations all done now?” the latter asked.

“They are~. All that’s left is to keep the rumors goin’ so no one tries to join the piano club, keep an eye on those involved to make sure there aren’t any surprises, and wait for the big day. Man~, I’ve worked hard, I’ve worked hard,” Nonoa said with no sign of fatigue whatsoever, prompting Miyabi to give her a slightly resentful glare.

“*You* worked hard…? That’s *my* line, you know?”

“*Ehhh*~?” Nonoa let out a protesting voice.

“‘*Ehhh~?*’ my ass,” Miyabi shot back. “You left convincing the piano club’s vice president, securing the person who’ll actually perpetrate this for all of us, to me, and now you’re just like, ‘*Ehhh~?*’?”

Nonoa was someone with multiple members of her entourage you could label as the “popular kids,” people she relied on for getting information and spreading rumors. In addition to them, she also had four people as her quote unquote “bodyguards,” or at least, that’s what they believed themselves to be—fanatic friends who help Nonoa from behind the scenes, despite having no apparent connection to her in public view.

However, Miyabi Shikumagawa belonged to neither group.

On the surface, Miyabi was just one of Nonoa's many acquaintances thanks to her wide social circle. In reality, however, she was someone who understood Nonoa's true nature completely, assisting her in many of her schemes. She was what you could call an accomplice.

What's more, she surpassed even Sayaka and Masachika in terms of understanding who Nonoa Miyamae really was as a person. With the exception of Nonoa herself, Miyabi might really be the person who understood her the best in the whole world.

"Sorry, sorry, I really appreciate it," Nonoa reassured her. "I just stand out too much so I can't really do direct negotiations like that."

"I get that, sure… There's only so much you can do with disguises or makeup with a face like that and all. Still, I can't shake the feeling that *I'm* always the one stuck with the risky, high-stakes stuff…"

When it came to scheming, Nonoa actually rarely took direct action herself. She would simply just manipulate her entourage and friends with words, leaving almost no trace of her own malice behind. What's more, she would only really give them the bare minimum amount of information in the first place, so it wasn't like they could detect any real ill intent.

The same was true with Ayano. The only instructions Nonoa had given her were to make sure that both Masachika and Yuki wouldn't be able to participate in the upcoming student assembly, and be in charge of handling the votes alongside Alisa. That was it. She hadn't told her about what would happen at the assembly, nor what consequences would come about.

Miyabi was the sole exception to this. She was someone who had heard Nonoa's entire plan, running about to do whatever was needed to mold the environment that Nonoa desired.

"That's why I said I appreciate *iiiit*~… I'll properly thank you with my body~" Nonoa told her.

"I'm quoting you on that, okay? This time was a ton of work, so I'm not taking any NGs[2], got it?"

“Yep, yep. *After* the student assembly~,” Nonoa smiled faintly, casually putting off her act of repayment with practiced ease. “Now then, now then… I wonder how Alissa and Kuzecchi are gonna react. Can’t wait♡”

And then, like a child looking forward to the outcome of some prank, she giggled innocently. But in this case, that “prank” was actually a malicious scheme that would serve to trample Alisa’s dreams and kick her down to the depths of despair. And yet, despite fully understanding that, Nonoa still wore a look of bright anticipation on her face, nothing else.

“Oh well, as long as Her Majesty’s having fun,” Miyabi could only respond with a wry smile, her eyes conveying a complicated mix of emotions—part pity and part reverence.

★·☆·★

The day of the student assembly.

Aoi, who would be taking the stage as the petitioner today, sat on the right side, feeling overwhelmed by the sheer weight of tension and loneliness.

“Now then,” Touya’s announcement rang out. “With both the petitioners and objectors agreeing to this, we will first begin with a statement from the objectors. Please, go ahead.”

“Yes,” the light music club president answered following Touya’s moderation, stepping onto the podium from the opposite side of the stage. “*Uhhh~*, hey everyone, thanks for being here. I’m Yanai, president of the light music club. Like, honestly, I never expected things to blow up this big, so I’m actually really nervous here and kinda at a lost for what to say, but… oh well, I was the one who brought this whole thing to the piano club in the first place, so I figured it’d be best if I explained the situation from our side first. Also, like, I don’t want this to turn into some big, heated debate or back-and-forth or anything like that, so, I really think I should just go ahead and say what I want to say first. Yeah…”

In an attempt to mask his nerves, Yanai gave a smile before continuing.

"*Uhhh~*, so first of all, you see: I honestly don't think we're asking for anything that's completely unreasonable here. It's just that, given the piano club's going to fall below the minimum number of members and be demoted to an interest group, all I'd done was ask if we could switch rooms. Like, we're not really saying 'hand it over,' or anything like that, okay? We've just asked if we could swap rooms… Like, you guys know, right? About how cramped our clubroom is? We're already sharing it with the photography club, and we're seriously having trouble with just storing our instruments. We have twenty-seven members in our club right now; we'll seriously be in trouble if we get any more. But the piano club only has four members right now, right? So, isn't it natural that the club with more members gets the bigger room?"

It was clear that his clumsy manner of speaking showed he wasn't used to settings like this; yet, it was exactly that unpolished and down-to-earth tone that resonated with the audience. What's more, maybe because his tension had gradually eased by this point, Yanai started to seem much more at ease as he wrapped up his speech.

"Like, in the first place, I really don't want to be that guy who's all uptight and hides behind the school rules or anything here, but technically, interest groups don't even have rights to clubrooms, do they? So really, I'm honestly kinda baffled that I even have to speak in front of everyone here like this… I mean, I've never done vocals before, so I guess using a mic on a stage like this is a kinda unique experience in a way? *Haha…*" he joked to lighten the mood. "*Uhhh*, anyway, with all that said, all I want is simply for the piano club to exchange their clubroom with us. That's all. Yeah, that's it."

Giving a quick bow at the end of his speech, Yanai was met with a warm applause and sense of approval from the auditorium. At the same time, a few teasing cheers rose from where the light music club members were seated. Blushing slightly as he continued to bow repeatedly, he made his way back to his seat on the left of the stage.

"Now then, we'll move on to the Q&As," Touya announced. "Petitioner, do you have any questions?"

Aoi jerked in her seat at his prompt, her body twitching upward.

“Ah, uh…” she stumbled as she tried to respond on reflex, with only a raspy sound escaping from her parched throat.

Swallowing hard, she found that even her mouth had gone bone-dry, and all it felt like was she gulping down a pocket of air. Still, even so, her throat managed to clear up just barely enough for her to reply in a trembling voice.

“N-no, I don’t,” she answered.

There simply just weren’t any questions to ask, of course. Everything the light music club president had said was perfectly reasonable. There was simply no room for argument.

“Right then, we’ll proceed to the petitioner’s statement… Is that all right?” Touya asked.

“Y-yes.”

Hoping at least to moisten her throat before taking the stage, Aoi reached for the plastic bottle on the table, yet her trembling hands made even unscrewing the cap a struggle. Certain that she’d spill it if she kept going, she gave up after a few seconds and stood.

“*Huff, huff…*”

Her legs felt weak from the nerves, and breathing didn’t come easy either. The walk to the podium felt both painfully long and rapid at the same time.

“……”

Aoi looked out at the audience as she stood at the podium. Maybe because the topic at hand hadn’t drawn much attention, the seats were only sparsely filled. She couldn’t even make out their faces in the darkness from the brightly lit stage. And yet…, she couldn’t help but feel like she was surrounded by gazes far from friendly, as though they were watching some kind of spectacle. Was it really just her imagination?

No, it’s… probably not.

The palpably hostile atmosphere pressed heavily against her skin. With the piano club now buried in a wave of bad reputation, everyone was just waiting to see what kind of outrageous claim she would try to make.

"*Huff, huff…*"

Aoi felt like she might throw up on the spot. Her mouth and throat continued to be as dry as ever, and she couldn't stop the cold sweat from rolling down her neck. Unable to meet the collective gaze of the audience for any longer, she lowered her face toward the podium and… began to speak from that position.

"I'm the piano club's vi—… um, v-vice president… Aoi Tsukamoto…" she stuttered, pressing on with a desperate determination despite so. "I had first… encountered the piano currently kept in the piano club's room back in my second year of junior high…"

She didn't even need to look at the audience to realize the confusion that was currently spreading through all their faces. Still, for Aoi, this was all she had.

There was just no way she could outmatch the light music club's claim with logic alone, so… all she could do was apparel to their hearts. To speak honestly and openly about their feelings, and to hope that they could empathize with her.

"I had, until then…, originally planned on applying to a different high school," she pushed forward. "But when I encountered that piano… I really felt like my l-life had changed. So this is how it feels to have your world change, I had thought… I really, truly felt that…"

Memories of him…, of Stein-kun, raced through her mind.

"I studied hard… As hard as I could. My teachers from junior high had told me over and over that I was being reckless, but… but all I really wanted was just a chance to play that piano one more time, no matter what… So I studied so hard that I barely slept. I worked harder than I ever had in my life… I even lost six kilos. I really, really studied hard until it felt like I was even coughing up blood… And then, I was somehow accepted. And when I finally got to play that piano again…"

A smile naturally broke out on Aoi's face as the memory of that very moment came rushing back to her. It was an awkward smile, laced heavily with nothing but nerves, but she kept on speaking, on the verge of tears.

"It felt like everything I'd done to that point was worth it. You might think that I'm exaggerating, but I truly mean it. To me, that piano… Stein-kun is like a lover—no, someone even more important than that…!" she cried out with a blurred vision, tears having welled up on her eyes by this point, refusing to stop no matter how many times she blinked. "I-I don't want to be separated from him. He's been lent to us by an alumnus in the Raikokai. H-he'll surely be returned to his owner if our clubroom is taken away…!"

Just imagining such a future made her tears fall even harder, and Aoi, now almost hyperventilating, could only plead desperately.

"I know what I'm asking for is something unreasonable…, but, but, I'm begging you… I'm begging you! Please!" she begged with urgent breathlessness, lowering her already downturned face even further to the point where it was practically rubbing against the podium. "Please don't take him away from me…!!!"

★·☆·★

Oh dear me~. What a surprise~, Nonoa thought as she watched over the proceedings with genuine surprise at both Aoi's plea and the effect it was having, sitting among the audience with the other members of the light music club.

Originally, the school's general perception of the piano club had been something like "the piano prince Yuusho and his entourage." Hardcore piano enthusiasts like Aoi rarely emerged from the clubroom, while Yuusho—who was already flashy enough to stand out on his own—and his followers made their presence known outside of it. Naturally, that became the club's image.

And to be blunt, said followers of Yuusho didn't exactly leave good impressions on other students, particularly those part of other

music-related clubs. Their excessively high-handed arrogance, driven by their blind devotion to Yuusho, and their frequent condescending remarks to other male students had created friction. As a result, the piano club itself had earned a reputation as “a bunch of snobby, stuck-up jerks.” After the cultural festival, when the long-simmering, collective discontent had finally bubbled over—with students grumbling aloud comments like “They’ve always been like that!”—the piano club’s bad image spread across school like wildfire.

And it was something Nonoa herself had been fanning the flames of by spreading more rumors. It naturally meant that the piano club’s reputation was at rock bottom. In fact, even today, most of the audience had been watching with cold and skeptical eyes before Aoi had begun her statement, waiting to hear what sort of outrageous claims the oh-so high-and-mighty piano club would make.

But now, everyone looked completely defanged, and they instead cast bewildered glances at each other.

“…Do the objectors have any questions?” Touya asked after a short pause.

“Huh? N-no, not at all. None.”

Even the president of the light music club was visibly shaken, clearly moved by the power of sympathy. The same went for the other members of the light music club, like Takeshi—who sat next to Nonoa—and Hikaru, who sat beyond him. Both wore expressions that practically bore the question, “What do we do now?”

“Now then, we’ll move on to the closing arguments…” Touya began to say as much as he followed procedure, before stopping himself as he glanced at Aoi standing at the podium, quickly averting his eyes. “No, both sides seem to have said everything they wanted to, so we’ll proceed with preparations for a vote. Please wait for a moment.”

As he spoke, the podium was cleared away and replaced with a long table bearing a ballot box. Meanwhile, the audience remained visibly confused.

No waaay~. Don't tell me the piano club's actually gonna win at this rate? Nonoa thought as she looked over at Aoi with deep curiosity, having just watched her completely shift the mood of the student assembly through pure emotion.

She herself didn't have it in her heart to be moved by such an teary-eyed appeal, and honestly, she didn't even care about Aoi's speech at all. But still, the completely unexpected direction it had taken was, simply put, entertaining. Still…

Oh well, there's just no way it's gonna end like this, she thought confidently, with comments then beginning to rise from various members of the audience the moment she did, as if to throw cold water on the wave of sympathy.

"But whether or not that piano gets taken back is a completely different issue from switching clubrooms, isn't it?" one person protested.

"That was *suuuuper* personal," another person rang out.

"Like, who the heck's Stein-kun supposed to be?" came another.

"I mean sure, you can call it pitiful, and yeah, you'd be right… But what about the other piano club members? There's absolutely no way I can sympathize with a club that's sent a single girl to fight alone."

More comments came in one after another, eventually then spurring up the light music club.

"Yeah… We've got a whole twenty-seven others being inconvenienced here…" one member finally raised their voice.

And all that did was serve to trigger a ripple of more self-justifying, yet hesitant, claims from within the light music club.

"That's right…" another member spoke up. "I mean, *they're* the ones being unreasonable in the first place…"

"And also, like, wouldn't that piano be taken back in the first place once they've lost club status anyway?" came another argument.

"Now you've mentioned that… it does feel like this is a problem that goes beyond just having a clubroom."

"Yeah. Us giving up our request and them having the piano taken away anyway would leave us looking stupid."

Perhaps beginning to feel like they were the bad guys, members of the light music club began to justify themselves with the logic that the piano being taken away was the piano club's own responsibility, not them delivering the final blow—albeit with no one in particular leading the movement.

They were, objectively speaking, using rather flimsy excuses, but crowd psychology had long started to kick in with so many people together, and their thinking naturally drifted toward overlooking the minor contradictions.

Honestly, the light music club's always got a huge advantage with this many members around in the first place, don't they~? Sure, it looks like a few people from the piano club have shown up—Yuusho included—but still… It's basically many against a few, isn't it~? Nonoa coolly observed the situation as if it had nothing to do with her at all, completely removed from said crowd psychology.

Meanwhile, Takeshi, still seemingly caught up in his sympathy for Aoi, glanced left and right.

"Is that… true? Huh… What d'you think?" he asked.

"*Hmm~…*" Hikaru folded his arm at his question, a conflicted expression forming on his face.

Ahh~, they're hesitating, huh~? Hmm~, these two might not be able to side with either and just cast blank votes at this rate.

Sensing the rising conflicting feelings from the two, Nonoa decided to gently nudge things to prevent an unwanted outcome. Putting on a similarly conflicted expression like Hikaru, she pretended to be in deep thought.

"*Hmm~*, yeah. Vice Prez-san does seem kinda pitiful, amirite…?"

"Ah. Yeah, right? I mean, it's not like we absolutely *have* to have the piano club's room or anything…" Takeshi agreed and turned to Nonoa with a slightly relieved look, having harbored a strong sense of sympathy for Aoi deep down.

It was an action that, in turn, pulled the attention of the other light music club members, members who'd been caught up in the crowd psychology. They turned to Nonoa with expressions resembling that of those who had cold water splashed on them.

"But y'know~, thinking about it calmly, aren't we overreacting a little bit if we take this vote *that* seriously?" Nonoa, feeling their gazes, spoke under the pretense of talking to Takeshi but in a voice loud enough for everyone nearby to hear. "It's not like we have to absolutely follow what the student assembly decides or anything."

"Huh?"

"It's just how it is, amirite?" she continued. "There's still the school's decision to consider, and even if we win here, it's not like it'll immediately be like, 'Okay, piano club, please vacate your clubroom now,' will it?"

"Ah, yeah… Gotcha," Takeshi surrendered.

A sense of ease finally returned to his face, thanks to his assumption that "a vote for the light music club equals a death sentence for Aoi" being dispelled by Nonoa's composed observation. Taking advantage of that moment, Nonoa pressed further.

"So, we should think of winning this vote as having the right to use the piano club's room for practice, shouldn't we?" she reasoned. "Whether or not we actually swap clubrooms is something we can always discuss later, or something like that… On the other hand, don'tcha think Yuushou[3] will use us losing as an excuse to totally shut us down?"

"*Ahhh*… Totally," Takeshi grimaced as Nonoa's words reminded him of Yuusho being the piano club's president.

The other members of the light music club did the same, honing their eyes in on the front row of seats where Yuusho sat with sour faces.

Seeing the members who'd been momentarily swayed by emotion now fully regain their composure, Nonoa gave a tiny shrug.

Sorry, Vice Prez-san, she gave her half-hearted apology inwardly. *Can't really be having the piano club winnin' here.*

With the preparations for the vote having finally been completed meanwhile, Touya got ready to make his announcement.

"Well then, please cast your votes. If you're voting in favor of the petitioners, the piano club, please use a white ball. If you're voting in favor of the objectors, the light music club, please use a red ball. If you do not wish to vote for either, please do not place any at all. Now then, let's begin from the front row, starting from that side," his voice echoed as he pointed to one side of the auditorium.

Following Touya's instructions, the students present in the audience each took out the red and white plastic balls—each about two centimeters in diameter—that they had received upon entry. Clutching either one of them in their hand, or holding out an empty fist, they headed up onto the stage.

Red for me, obviously, Nonoa gripped her red ball in her right hand, slipping her white one into her skirt pocket as she made her way toward the stage.

"This way, please. A white ball for the piano club, and a red ball for the light music club," Alisa repeated the instructions in a steady tone as she monitored the voting process in front of the ballot box to avoid any errors, with Ayano beside her counting the number of voters. "Please do not hand in a ball if you are abstaining from the vote. Also, please open your hands for us after voting."

"Thanks for your hard work, Alissa~," Nonoa chimed to Alisa when her turn came, dropping her red ball into the box.

"Yes, you too, Nonoa-san," Alisa responded briefly in her usual composed tone, keeping her gaze deadset on the ballot box. "Show me your hand."

She had a serious expression, focused entirely on fulfilling her duties, showing no hint of realizing that a wicked scheme that could close off her future had already been closing in.

"Yeah, yeah," Nonoa did as she was told, holding up her empty right hand.

Giving her a small nod, Alisa then motioned with her eyes toward the stairs leading back to the seats, before then turning her attention to the next person in line.

C'ya, Alissa, Nonoa gave a light wave with her open right hand. *This'll probably be the last time I'll see you as a student council officer, won't it?*

With those thoughts in her heart, she then looked over to Ayano. The latter met her gaze with a blank expression for a few seconds, before then lowering her eyes. Whether such an action was out of guilt for having helped Nonoa with her plan, or for some other reason, her emotions remained unreadable. It was hard to tell, so Nonoa didn't bother with worrying about it.

Oh well, looks like she's followed my instructions either way. Don't think she's realized she's gonna get caught up in this too.

Returning to her seat, Nonoa opened up her messages to make sure that no unexpected developments had occurred leading into the final phase of her scheme.

Yukki's already gone home, and Kuzecchi's practicing with the wind ensemble... I was a li'l wary since Yuusho had apparently made contact with him, but well, seems like there're no problems there in the end.

Not that Masachika and Yuki would be able to deal with what was about to happen even if they were there in the first place.

Still, smiling at how swimmingly things were progressing according to plan, Nonoa waited for the voting to finish.

Having only needed to wait for not even ten minutes in the end, all the votes had been submitted and the count had begun.

The screen on stage featured a live view of two wooden-framed boards placed on the long table where the ballot box had been set. Their widths were just long enough to line up ten balls in a row, allowing for ten votes to be validated at once. Alisa and Ayano began placing the balls along the boards in turns.

With the members of the light music club holding their breaths, and Aoi collapsing her hands together in a prayer, the results were revealed soon enough.

"Here are the results," Touya announced. "Twenty-five white votes. Thirty-nine red votes. Seventeen blanks. Therefore, the objectors win."

His declaration prompted sighs of relief from the light music club, though many of them still wore slightly awkward and complex expressions. Among them, Nonoa kept her eyes fixed on Aoi, who stood on the right side of the stage, her head deeply bowed.

Now then, Vice Prez-san~. It's all over now. D'you understand what you'll need to do to protect that precious piano of yours now~?

Despite not being able to see Aoi's face clearly from where she sat, especially with her head still lowered like that, Nonoa was still able to feel her emotions as they moved. It was as if she were holding them in her hand.

Despair, grief, frustration, hesitation. And then…

Raising her head slightly, Aoi's lips pulled tight as she grit her teeth. And in the next moment:

"F-fraud! The vote was rigged!!!"

Aoi's cry echoed throughout the auditorium.

[1]: Ooooo, look at me!!!! I'm so quirky and different!!! PAY ATTENTION TO ME. PAY ATTENTION TO MY "disorder"!!!!

Here we go with the textbook corny psychopath trope again. I swear all this does is incite those cringey "step on me!!!" losers who delude themselves into thinking they like psychopaths because they wanna stand out and be different/quirky. Like no one cares bruh, you're obviously forcing it and everyone can see through it; no one likes psychopaths, including you. You don't need to be different and that's okay 🙏; your obvious attention-seeking is cringe and only drives people away from you.

[2]: Slang that stands for "no good," standing for things that are off limits. Miyabi's essentially saying that she isn't taking any restrictions or refusals in regards to her payment.

[3]: Yes, this is how she says it.

Chapter 10 - The Queen

"Alright, let's make this part a li'l shorter here."

"That's a good idea."

It was currently around the time when the results of the student assembly's vote were being announced in the auditorium, with Masachika being in the music room, going over some sheet music with Elena.

"*Mm*, alright. Right, let's go through it one more time," the latter suggested.

"Yes."

"'*Kaaay~*, everyone, back to your spots~," Elena announced to the room. "Ah, you there~! No messin' with your phone during *practiiiice~*!"

"Ah, '*kaaay*."

"C'mon, get ready~. This isn't the time to be slackin' off~!"

"Yes, Prez."

"That's right."

"*Ufufu*."

As the members of the wind ensemble returned to their positions, with them having practiced individually for a while, Elena turned to Masachika.

"By the way, a student assembly's meeting today, right?" she asked. "I know it's strange for me to ask, but was it really okay for you to skip it, Kuze-kun?"

"Yep. Well, I've got a reliable partner attending on my behalf," Masachika reassured her.

"*Oooooh~*. Quite the passionate bond of trust ya got there."

"*Haha*. I've got other reliable… allies there too," he added, albeit in a somewhat hesitant tone.

"What's with that pause? Don't you trust your fellow student council members!?"

"Please stop playing about with Kuze, Prez~. Come back here~" a member of the wind ensemble suddenly interrupted.

"Ah, *okaaaay, okaaaay~*. Good grief, good grief. Being popular sure is tough; everyone wants a piece of me," Elena muttered with a playful tone, also returning to her seat. "Okay. Then, let's take it from the top once."

Following her lead, Masachika turned back to face the piano.

★·☆·★

"F-fraud! The vote was rigged!!!" Aoi's cry echoed throughout the auditorium, leaving every student—apart from Nonoa and a few other conspirators—stunned into silence.

Even the members of the student council had all turned to Aoi with their eyes wide in shock… In the midst of it all, Nonoa let out a small smile in her heart.

Well~, of course it's come to this, she concluded.

Most students probably felt that Aoi's words were nothing more than a mere, reckless outburst, culminating from the result of being backed into a corner. After all, whether or not fraud had occurred could easily be verified immediately with the red-and-white voting system that had been used. All they needed to do was collect the leftover unused balls from the voters. Everyone could see that; it was hard to imagine that anyone would risk pulling off any kind of fraud given the circumstances.

You'd think so, right?

But the reality of the situation was that there *was* fraud. Though who it was directed at was not Aoi… It was Alisa, who was now staring at her in a daze.

Now's not the time to be stunned, Alissa~ Don'tcha get it? Who d'you think's first to be suspected when a vote has been rigged?

It was a trap that was almost impossible to predict or avoid, yet it also didn't mean you couldn't escape after falling into it.

The courage to remain calm even after falling for the trap, the intelligence to swiftly uncover the truth, and the eloquence to convince those around you of the conclusion you've drawn. Those were qualities that allowed someone to still be within reach of escape.

Welp, guess it could be possible if Kuzecchi or Yukki were here, couldn't it~? But can Alissa really deal with all of this nastiness by herself? Nonoa chewed over the thought as she watched the show unfold on the stage with an intrigue gaze…

But as things started to reach their final stage, the next person to move wasn't Alisa, nor was it Touya. It was someone seated within the audience.

★·☆·★

"That's enough!" a male student suddenly burst onto the stage with a voice that sounded almost theatrical.

All eyes turned toward him in surprise as another unexpected development unfolded… The voice it belonged to, of all people? None other than Yuusho Kiryuuin, the president of the piano club.

Even Aoi was caught off guard by this, standing there dumbfounded with her mouth slightly agape at the stage intruder. As everyone continued to watch, stunned, Yuusho turned from the stage and addressed the audience in a booming voice.

“That’s enough now! Former members of the piano club! Are you really going to just sit there and do nothing, even after hearing such a desperate cry from your former vice president!?” he posed the question, continuing to speak in spite of the fact that most students were still trying to catch up to what was happening. “There’s still time now; it’s not too late! If you still have even a tiny shred of care for your former friend, now’s the time! Should you not raise your hand, right here, right now!?”

Thrusting his hand high into the hair, Yuusho surveyed the audience.

“Right here, right now! Those who declare their intention to join the piano club, raise your hands now!!!” he shouted.

With that, the students finally began to understand his motives. A stir of murmurs quickly rose throughout the audience, and then…, slowly, hands began to rise from the seats. One, two, three… Confirming that, Yuusho smiled in satisfaction and turned his face toward Touya, who remained standing at the podium.

“Student Council President,” he addressed. “As you can see, the piano club has recovered its membership. With this, the premise of today’s assembly has been overturned, hasn’t it?”

“…Oh, yeah. Well, I guess, huh?” Touya replied with a hint of hesitation.

Nodding slowly before clearing his throat once, he turned his gaze toward the president of the light music club on the left of the stage.

“*Uhhh*, objector,” he addressed. “Though the student assembly had voted in favor of your cause, it is now uncertain whether your demands will be met, with the piano club’s dissolution being overruled. The results themselves will officially be recorded, but I hope you can understand that much?”

“Huh? *Ahhh*, yes, I understand. If that’s how it is, then…” the light music club president trailed off, still not seeming to fully grasp what had just transpired.

Even so, there was no denying the visible trace of relief in his expression.

But at the same time, as if their minds had finally caught up, dissatisfied grumbles began to rise from the audience.

“Huh…? What’s all this about?” confusion arose.

“What kinda horseplay is this…?” another person asked.

“The heck was even the point of that vote earlier, then…?” someone argued.

“Just get Kiryuuin off the stage already,” came an antagonistic comment.

With that, multiple waves of hostility now came Yuusho’s way, who had not only barged onto the stage uninvited, but flipped the whole situation completely on its head.

Yet, despite this, he remained unfazed and turned to face Aoi.

“What a splendid speech, Vice Prez…” he spoke to her. “Your heartfelt cry really moved them. You should be proud.”

With his right hand then pressed to his chest and his left arm opened wide, Yuusho bowed in a grand display of respect.

“Kiryuuin…” Aoi could only mutter.

And then, as if trying to reassure the girl who’d fought alone all this while, Yuusho smiled gently, leaving Aoi to stumble forward to him and…

“It’s your damn fucking fault in the first place!!” she yelled.

“I’m sorry!!!”

Then, with full force, Aoi drove her knee deep into Yuusho’s solar plexus.

★·☆·★

Taking Aoi’s running knee head on, Yuusho crumpled onto the stage floor.

It was an utterly pitiful and comical sight, and it seemed to satisfy the members of the audience that had directed their irritation at him. Some had even begun to snicker one after another.

As the atmosphere within the auditorium gradually began to cool down thanks to the suddenly comedic turn of events, Nonoa watched Yuusho with an unimpressed look.

No way, to think Yuushou[1] *of all people would get in the way here… I was keeping an eye on him too…*

Up until now, Nonoa had not obtained any specific intel suggesting that Yuusho had been moving to prevent the piano club from collapsing. But now, going off of what had just happened, it was clear that he had been properly reaching out to former members behind the scenes, urging them to attend the student assembly as part of the audience.

And the very fact that he had operated so perfectly under the radar meant that he had been wary of someone interfering from the start…

What the heck, I don't remember slipping up that *badly to raise any obvious red flags…* Nonoa thought, puzzled. *I mean, then again, Yuushou's already had a rough experience with me before. Maybe he just had a hunch or somethin'~?*

Just then, the boy in question slowly stood up with his abdomen clutched, and their eyes met at that exact moment… At the very least, Nonoa thought they did.

Seeing the faintly triumphant smile tugging at his lips, she narrowed her eyes.

…Yeah, it's kinda annoying how he's acting all smug in victory, but maybe I'll back off quietly for today, Nonoa concluded. *It's not like I've taken any damage myself, and I've gained Ayanono as a new pawn~, so it wasn't a total loss.*

With those thoughts in mind, Nonoa managed the frustration of being edged right at the last second, shrugging to no one in particular.

"*Maaaan~,* what a waste of time, huh?" she muttered.

“Ah, yeah. Definitely…” Takeshi raised his voice in agreement.

“Or rather, why didn’t they go back to the piano club earlier if they were planning to raise their hands here…” Hikaru remarked.

“Who knows~?” Nonoa commented. “Maybe that Vice Prez-san just couldn’t bring herself to be honest ’til now, or maybe it was just easy for them to raise their hands in the moment. Something like that, don’tcha think?”

Though she had offered a guess to Hikaru’s aimless remark, the truth of the matter was that Nonoa had absolutely no care to wonder what the real reason was.

Aaaah, I’m gettin’ pissed again. Guess I’ll just head home and watch some extreme foreign prank videos. The kinda ones where the victims get real scared out their minds they run off screaming~

With her newfound resolve to comfort her dried-up heart with some quick and dirty fuel, she began to rise from her seat.

【Hey, look. Are you watching me?】[2]A small voice, uttered almost like a prayer to steel its speaker, drifted faintly through the air at that moment.

Yet immediately after, it turned into that of cold conviction, slicing through the relaxed atmosphere.

“What do you mean the vote was rigged?”

At the sound of the familiar voice, Nonoa turned her eyes toward the stage.

Its speaker, none other than Alisa, rose slowly from her seat. Pierced by her sharp gaze, Aoi could only stiffen in place.

“Eh, ah, that’s…” she stumbled.

“I cannot overlook what you just said,” Alisa pressed on. “It implies you’re questioning the fairness of the student council-run student assembly.”

“Ah, *ugh*…” Aoi could only hang her head when faced with the pressure, her face turning pale.

She looked like she might burst into tears at any moment, and her fragile demeanor once again drew sympathetic glances from the audience. At the same time, Alisa was, in turn, met with reproachful stares.

“Prez, please collect the remaining balls from the voters and conduct a recount,” she turned to Touya and said.

“Kujou? That’s—”

“I simply cannot allow any suspicion to remain as one of those in charge of counting the votes,” Alisa cut him off. “For the sake of both my and Kimishima-san’s reputations, please.”

“*Hmm*…”

“We’ll be collecting the remaining balls at the end anyway. Doing it now won’t cause extra time and effort. I’ll take full responsibility,” she pushed forward with an unusually firm insistence, prompting Touya to widen his eyes.

“…Understood,” he eventually nodded. “I’ll leave this to you, but the responsibility is *mine*.”

“…Thank you very much.”

“Right then, everyone,” Touya addressed the audience. “We apologize for the inconvenience, but we will now be conducting a recount. Please place your remaining voting balls into the ballot box, just like before.”

Oh my, oh my. Oh my, oh my, oh my? A smile crept across Nonoa’s lips as the unexpected extra drama unfolded.

“Huh, a recount now?” Takeshi voiced his bewilderment.

“Alya-san…?” Hikaru murmured in confusion.

Urged once again by Touya, the students—many looking puzzled or exasperated—began making their way toward the stage.

“Alright, please place all your remaining balls here,” Alisa instructed once again. “Make sure to put in both if you had abstained earlier.”

Following her orders, the students dropped their balls one after another into the ballot box.

“Workin’ hard, Alissa~. Rough day, huh~?”

“Yes; it can’t be helped,” Alisa simply responded calmly, her gaze still fixed on the ballot box even as Nonoa spoke to her once again.

Her demeanor was composed and unshaken, and Nonoa couldn’t help but feel a particular presentiment welling within her in face of it. Her chest fluttered with excitement.

Ooooh~? Now then, now then, I wonder how this’ll turn out? she thought while returning to her seat, waiting for the recount to unfold as she found herself in an unexpectedly gleeful mood from the string of unexpected events.

The collection of the remaining balls eventually concluded, and once again, they were lined up on the wooden-framed boards, broadcast for the entire audience to see. And as the sorting progressed…, puzzled murmurs began to rise from all around the audience.

“*Hmm?”* came one person.

“Huh?” uttered another.

“Huh, something’s not…”

As the sorting neared its end, more and more stunned voices rang out at the obviously strange scene shown on screen.

“Why… are there more red balls now?” someone eventually addressed the elephant in the room.

It was a discrepancy that anyone could recognize. Of course, not every student present had remembered the previously announced count to a T, but the current disparity presented should have been simply impossible. There was just no way for the number of unused red balls to amount to a number larger than the ones used initially to vote against the piano club.

"Huh, what the heck?" The audible confusion continued.

"The total number of balls… doesn't add up, does it?"

"Or rather, if there are more red balls now… Huh? Wait, wait! Doesn't that mean the piano club actually won earlier!?"

More and more confused voices erupted from the crowd at the abnormal situation. It was now evident that the number of balls collected the second time didn't match the number of votes originally cast. Not including blank votes, of course.

But alas, *this* was the very trap Nonoa had set up.

It wasn't even anything particularly complicated. All she did was hand out eight extra red balls (via Miyabi) to eight collaborators, stolen from the supply room ahead of time. Then, instead of returning the remaining white tokens that they should have had left during the recount, they placed the extra red ones they'd received beforehand.

As a result, eight uncast white balls had effectively vanished, while eight additional red ones had appeared out of thin air. It resulted in a sixteen-vote swing (plus eight to the piano club, minus eight to the light music club), insinuating that the piano club had actually won by only two votes. Such a margin was purely coincidental, but the dramatic effect it had was tremendous.

"What is the meaning of this!?" a sharp voice then rang out from the audience, drawing the attention of the confused students.

There, a female student had stood up from her seat, pointing an accusing finger at Alisa with a sharp glare.

"You talk all high and mighty, and yet there really was fraud, wasn't there!?" she continued her tirade.

“She’s right!” another student spoke up, following the girl’s outburst. “This means the piano club should’ve won, doesn’t it!?”

“Don’t tell me. You’ve rigged the vote because you’ve still got a grudge against the piano club over the cultural festival, right!?”

Voice after voice condemning Alisa began to rise one after another.

As if spurred by the growing commotion, the uninvolved students within the audience also began to cast their suspicious glances toward Alisa… Yet Nonoa—the very mastermind behind the whole entire setup—simply cast a cold look in the direction of her collaborators.

Dumbasses, she spat in her mind. *Sure, it’s a total surprise attack, and maybe we could push through with pure momentum if this was the right situation. But in* this *case~? Trying to pin the blame on Alissa’s purely just unreasonable. Would’ve been* waaaay *more effective to just drop in their white balls during the recount instead of the red ones if they wanted to really undermine her.*

Thinking as though it were someone else’s problem entirely, Nonoa then turned her gaze to the girl who had spoken out first…, realizing she recognized her face.

Huh? Feel like I’ve seen her berfore… Ahhh*, she’s the one who picked a fight with Alissa the other day. So that’s why the blood’s rushin’ to her head, huh?*

The original plan was actually for Aoi to request a recount, during which the fraud would be “discovered” and pinned on Alisa. It would have still been a completely false accusation, of course, and there wouldn’t even have been any conclusive evidence that she was the one who rigged it in the first place. But even so, despite it just then becoming suspicion, the mere accusation of tampering with a student assembly vote would have been fatal for any candidate running in the election.

Who, in their right mind, would want to cast their vote for someone who might have committed voter fraud? Even if you were framed, the inability to clear that suspicion against you would mark you as an option on the ballot lacking the strength to be a proper candidate.

And so, Alissa and Ayanono—in charge of counting the votes—would've been blamed for riggin', forcing them out of the election… That would've made Kuzecchi and Yukki winners by default with them gone, making both Ayanono and Sayacchi all smiles… I mean, not that I actually expected it to go all that perfectly, though~

Still, what Nonoa hadn't anticipated was that Alisa, even when faced with such baseless accusations, didn't so much as flinch. Even as more and more suspicious glares rained down on her from the audience, Alisa just calmly continued with the recount, composed as ever.

And maybe that poised demeanor seemed to irritate the girl who'd stood up first even more.

"Hey!" she raised her voice in frustration. "Say something alrea—"

"Please be quiet, will you? We're in the middle of recounting," Alisa readily cut her off.

It was a voice as cold and flat as ice, carrying the ability to snuff out any uproar.

Her attitude was more chilling, more stern, and yet more dignified than anything Alisa Kujou had ever shown before in such a setting. Unfazed by the waves of hostility directed at her from multiple fronts, she stood firm and tall. Like an ice queen.

The antagonistic girl, along with the other students, all held their breaths in unison, only able to stare at Alisa motionlessly. Under the pressure of their collective gaze, Alisa—now the unquestionable focal point of the entire stage—slowly opened her mouth.

"…Indeed, we have fraud," she declared. "Right now, what we have are fifty red and forty-eight white balls. Strictly speaking, taking into account the blank votes, we should have forty-two red and fifty-six white…[3] That means eight votes have been swapped—eight red balls replacing eight white ones," she spoke plainly, eyes fixed and unwavering on the balls in front of her.

Then, raising her head, Alisa swept a sharp gaze across the audience.

“However, it goes without saying… I am *not* the one who tampered with the votes. I wouldn’t have gone out of my way to demand a recount if I had, exposing my fraud,” she reasoned, proclaiming her innocence with absolute calm, turning to Ayano beside her before continuing. “Likewise, I do not believe Kimishima-san, who did not stop me from insisting on the recount, to be the culprit either. Then, in that case…”

Trailing off for a brief moment, Alisa turned her gaze back to the audience once more.

“There’s someone among the audience who’s brought in extra red balls, manipulated the numbers, and fabricated this fraud,” she stated clearly and firmly in an unwavering, resolute voice.

A stir rippled through the audience in response to her accusatory remark. Her words had completely crossed the point of no return; it was as if she was treating them like a bunch of criminals.

“Huh? What, what does she mean? Like, the heck is going on?” Takeshi raised his voice in confusion for the umpteenth time today, still unable to keep up with the unfolding events.

“No, wait a sec…” Hikaru also spoke up in a similar tone. “So they did this to make the piano club lose…? No, wait, huh?”

On the other hand, those who had been cornered by Alisa’s accusatory deduction began to protest in pure desperation.

“Don’t screw with us! What kind of proof do you even have!?”

“You better be showing some real evidence if you say that!”

Completely unfazed by any of the clamor, Alisa turned her gaze back to Touya once more.

“Let’s conduct a search of everyone’s belongings, Prez. Right here, right now,” she demanded.

“A search…!?” Touya responded in a bewildered tone.

“We should easily find multiple individuals hiding at least one white ball on them if my assumption’s correct.”

“N-no, but…”

“You said you would be entrusting this matter to me, didn’t you?”

“*Mmf*…” Touya could only hesitate at Alisa’s drastic proposal, all while the girl who had stood up first grabbed her bag in a haste.

“I’m done with this nonsense…!” she muttered those words bitterly, stepping toward the exit.

KABOOOOM!!

A sound that resembled a small explosion then rang throughout the auditorium in the next moment, so powerful that it even caused a small tremor. It shook Alisa and the others on the stage with a sudden shock.

The source of such a force was a panel that stood at the front of the stage, struck by none other than Chisaki. Her face was downcast, and it drew the attention of everyone in the auditorium.

Slowly then raising her head, her arm still swung out at the board behind her, she glared at the students seated with a menacing stare, drawing out a strained “Eek!” from somewhere in the audience.

Since getting together with Touya, Chisaki had rarely ever shown this face of hers—the face of the school’s Donna. It was an expression that sent an array of boys trembling in fear, while causing some girls to shudder in exhilaration.

“Everyone! Put your hands behind your heads and don’t take a single step from where you are,” she gave her command with a voice as ominous as the black smoke that billowed out from an erupting volcano. “Anyone who moves is to be treated as an enemy.”

It was a completely one-sided order, and there was not even one single brave soul in this school who was willing to defy it. Not even instinctively.

Seeing *everyone* as they silently and swiftly obeyed, Chisaki then turned to those behind her with a completely disparate, gentle expression.

“Will you lemme take over from here on out, Alya-chan?” she asked in a friendly tone.

“…Yes,” Alisa answered after a small pause. “Thank you very much. I’ll leave the rest to you, Sarashina-senpai.”

Giving a slight nod as she received her permission, Chisaki once again glared down at the audience with a predominating Donna-like expression before pulling her phone out.

“I’m calling the remaining disciplinary committee members currently on campus,” she declared. “We’ll be conducting full body and bag searches. Think you can pull some disrespectful stunt on us, the student council, during a student assembly? Not a chance.”

With that, the perpetrators who’d set up the trap for Alisa had met their fate.

★·☆·★

“*Hah, hah, haah…*” Alisa panted as she beelined down the empty hallway toward the music room, with the student assembly having finally ended.

It was an action completely uncharacteristic of her, the very girl who normally upheld the school rules with dogmatic devotion. Luckily, before a teacher could even spot her, the person she had been searching for fortunately appeared from the distant end of the hallway.

“Hm? Whoa! Good work today, Alya!?” Masachika called out to Alisa in surprise, coming to a stop just in time for her to throw herself onto him with a force resembling that of a D1 collegiate American football player.

“*Uuuuuu~*” she whimpered, grabbing tightly onto the back of his uniform while burying her face into his shoulder.

“Wh-what’s wrong!?” Masachika asked in a panic. “Did something happen!?”

"*Uuuu…*" Yet Alisa didn't answer his anxious question, instead resolving to cling to him tightly, desperately holding onto his body as if she were hanging on for dear life.

Faced with the sight of his trembling partner, Masachika, perhaps sensing what she had been through, gently began to rub her back.

"…I see, you really gave it your all," he affirmed with soothing words. "Yeah, you did great."

"……"

"And you did it all alone… You really, really did your best."

Without saying anything more, Masachika simply comforted Alisa in silence.

[1]: Yes, she says this here.

[2]: Okay, I'm like 90% confident this is the right interpretation, but I'll break down the original line here. Okay, first of all, holy fuck, this line is written in a mix of Russian and Japanese, leaving it hard to interpret,【Ну, посмотри, кか、актебе見ててて？】

The "Ну" here is a common Russian expression that can mean things like "Well," "Come on," or "Hey" in certain contexts, and посмотри means look.

The к just seems to indicate a Russian pronunciation of the か (ka) particle, which in turn is part of the "актебе見ててて？" clause. Актебе is most likely a misspelling of "а к тебе" and is a term used to address someone. 見ててて literally just means "look" or "watch." Put all three together and you get "Are you watching?"

Thanks to Cactus for helping me confirm the Russian parts.

If you speak both Russian and Japanese and I've somehow fucked up, please do tell. Because I've spent like the last 40 minutes overthinking this shit to make sure I'm right. Literally crashed out.

[3]: Here're the numbers so you don't gotta do the math.

Original votes:
Red - 39
White - 25
Blank - 17

Expected balls received back:
Red - 25
White - 39
Blank - 17
Red (with blank) - 42
White (with blank) - 56

Actual balls received back (due to fraud):
Red - 33
White - 31
Blank - 17
Red (with blank) - 50
White (with blank) - 48

Insinuated actual votes:
Red - 31
White - 33
Blank - 17

Epilogue - Betrayal

The sun had completely set, and in a certain classroom that found only the light spilling in from the schoolyard as its only source of illumination, Nonoa and Ayano stood present.

"...So, what kind of scheme was this incident supposed to be in the end, Nonoa-san?" Ayano addressed Nonoa's turned back in a somewhat stiff voice despite being the one who'd been summoned, the latter gazing down at the schoolyard in silence.

She remained silent for a while longer in response... before then turning around with a sudden jerk, a bright smile plastered on her face.

"*Hm*? Ah, my bad, my bad. Was just lost in thought for a *liiiittle*~," Nonoa apologized while placing a finger to one corner of her mouth, her beaming smile still intact. "No, for real, what a surprising turn of events, huh~? Like, no way, Alissa suddenly suggestin' a recount right then and there~?"

She spoke in a cheerful tone, as if she were sharing her thoughts on just some normal sports match... But then, without warning, her expression immediately turned serious and she tilted her head with a soft flop.

"But, y'know, thinking about it now makes it sound pretty strange, *amiriiiite*~?" Nonoa reasoned in a tone that did not match such an expression. "Like, it all just looks like Alissa showin' her lofty integrity at a quick glance, as if she's just not able to stand being accused of fraud, I guess~? But if you think 'bout it calmly, cornering the piano club's Vice Prez-san was nothin' but a disadvantage for her back then, amirite~?"

She had rambled on without answering Ayano's original question, going off on a seemingly unrelated tangent. Ayano stood quietly with no words of her own.

"'Cause it's just how it is, isn't it~?" Nonoa continued in the wake of her silence. "Like, the whole auditorium had this *reeeally* sympathetic vibe for Vice Prez-san at the time; Alissa goin' out of her way to demand a recount in that situation with her whole 'See? There wasn't any fraud; apologize~' tone made *her* look like the bad guy, y'know? Matter of fact, everyone had this 'Just let it go…' kinda look to them the moment she started pressing Vice Prez-san, didn't they?"

Faced with Nonoa's recount of the whole event, Ayano listened in silence with her usual expressionless face, not once interrupting nor even offering a nod. Showing not even the slightest hint of being bothered by her silence, Nonoa continued with her completely casual tone.

"So, I got to thinking; Alissa *knew* that there would be fraud," she struck right at the heart of the matter. "But not just that—I think she figured it wasn't fraud meant to make Vice Prez-san lose, but one aimed at *her*."

It was a casually delivered deduction, one that made Ayano's brows twitch slightly in response. But even so, still without paying any attention, Nonoa continued with her soliloquizing analysis.

"Because you see, you only had two options if you were plannin' on targeting Vice Prez-san with fraud: either taking out the white balls from the ballot box, or havin' one person vote multiple times for the music club, right~? The former's not realistic given Alissa was watching over the box, so that only leaves the latter, doesn't it? But y'know… even though having a recount after that does reveal the fraud, it doesn't reveal *who* did it, yes? 'Cause the culprits wouldn't be left holdin' onto any physical evidence. And if that's the case, then there really isn't actually any benefit of exposing the fraud after all, right? Rather, all it does is insinuate that *she* was behind all of it, and that'd be bad for her~," Nonoa argued, thoughtfully placing a hand to her chin as she looked upward before continuing. "Still, I think there's just no way Alissa knew *everything* right from the very start, right~? Her reaction when Vice Prez-san shouted 'Fraud~!' didn't feel like an act. So, that means she probably *knew* she was being targeted; she just didn't know *how* they'd pull it off."

Wrapping up her long-winded hypothesis just like that, Nonoa then lowered her gaze back down to Ayano, smiling once again as if she were coming back to herself.

“Ah, my bad, my bad. Ended up yappin’ to myself for a bit there,” she spoke cheerfully. “What I’m tryna ask is…”

Trailing off with a friendly yet unnaturally bright smile, Nonoa walked toward Ayano, stopping at a distance close enough for her breath to prod at her face.

“Hey, Ayanono,” she called out to Ayano while looking down at her.

“Exactly,” a girl’s voice rang out at that moment along with the sound of the classroom’s sliding door being slid open, accompanied with a click as the lights in the classroom came on.

In the now suddenly bright room entered Yuki, with Masachika, Alisa, and Yuusho following right behind her.

“Oh my, oh my… What a most distinguished gathering we have here,” Nonoa chirped at the sight of such an unexpected development.

With Ayano quietly stepping aside to stand by Yuki, the five of them now faced her.

She was now faced with their piercing gazes; gazes that had seen through her entire scheme… And yet, even so, Nonoa couldn’t help but give a genuinely delighted smile, as though if she were welcoming the situation from the bottom of her heart.

Author's Afterword

Hello, SunSunSun here. There are two things I must apologize to all my readers this time around. First, there has been quite the long gap between Volume 9's release and bringing you guys Volume 10. Although I had slipped in a Behind The Scenes side volume along the way, ten whole months had ended up passing between the two. I am very sorry for having kept you all waiting for so long.

And then there's the second thing: those of you who have read the main story up to this point might have already noticed this, but… I had previously claimed that not reading Volume 4.5 wouldn't cause any problems when reading Volume 5 and onward. Welp, that was a lie! That's basically all there is to it… This volume features a brief reference to something that had happened in Volume 4.5—oh, I'm talking specifically about the story where Yuki locks Alya and Masachika in the P.E storage room, you know? If you haven't read Volume 4.5 and have no idea what that part was about, well, then just think of it as some event that happened in it and move on. Of course, you are more than welcome to go buy Volume 4.5 and read it too; just saying. Wouldn't mind that at all. Similarly, you'll never know if the same kinda thing would happen with the Behind The Scenes volume too, so if you haven't read that one yet, you're also welcome to buy and read it. Just saying, of course. Totally fine with me.

Now that the apologies and shameless plugs are out of the way, let's move on to talking about that book signing event we held in Taiwan last October. *Hmm~*, it's been around seven months since then at the time of writing this? I do think I've missed the right timing for this by quite a bit, but since my afterword for Behind The Scenes was limited to only around three pages, there's nothing I can do. Now, I'm writing this as I'm recalling what happened back then, but the thing I remember the most is the amazing hospitality from everyone at Kadokawa Taiwan. The food everyday was just so incredibly delicious. Also, I was pretty surprised that not only the staff at Kadokawa Taiwan, but also the hotel and airport staff, could speak quite a bit of Japanese. Oh, that reminds

me of a really interesting language-related fact too—about how the names of Roshidere characters are pronounced differently in Taiwan. It's only natural now that I think about it, though… Names written in katakana like Alya or Masha are assigned kanji characters that sound similar when translated locally over there.

As a result, Alya becomes Ailii, while Masha remains unchanged as Masha (though hearing locals pronounce it makes it sound a little bit like "Maacha"). On the other hand, names written in kanji, like Masachika or Yuki, are actually just written with the same characters but pronounced according to local mandarin, you know? This results in *completely* different pronunciations. I never got around to knowing that at first, so when I asked a fan about which character they liked the most during a book signing session, I was left there thinking, "Hm? Who?" when they gave their answer. It was only after that did I ask a Kadokawa Taiwan staff member about the whole, "So Alya's Ailii here in Taiwan?" line of thought and heard the whole explanation.

And with that, here we go! Here are the Taiwanese pronunciations for each character! First up, Yuki! Her name's… Yǒu Xī[1] (there's actually a slight pause between "Yǒu" and "Xī," so it's more like "Yǒu… Xī"). Yǒu Xī, Yǒu… Xī. Huh? Somehow picturing a li'l green dinosaur here…[2] Yeah, let's stop that train of thought right there… *Ahem*. Next, in rapid succession: Ayano's is Líng Nǎi, Nonoa's is Nǎi Nǎi Yà, Sayaka's is Shā Yě Jiā, Chisaki's is Máo Xiào, Sumire's is Jǐn, and Elena's is Yī Lǐ Nài. *Yeeeaaah…*, Chisaki's is definitely the cutest one here, no matter how you look at it… I personally like Nǎi Nǎi Yà too, though. Sayaka's feels like it keeps a lot of its original vibe, and by utter coincidence, Elena's ends up sounding like some evolved form of Ayano's… Also, Sumire's somehow gives off an "Arabian genie" kinda vibe[3]. Violet's probably still Violet in Taiwan, though. Oh? You wanted to know how it goes for the male characters too? Ah… Masachika is Zhèng Jìn, Touya is Tǒng Yě, while Gensei's Yán Qīng. No, yeah, I'll stop right there. It's a very interesting topic since kanji characters are used there locally too[4]. That's all.

Right then, onto the next topic. Let's talk about Puzzledere. Have you all been playing it? It's Roshidere's first, and currently only, official mobile game. I play it. I had actually promised myself with the thought, "I don't get the point of spending money on a mobile game based on my own work, so I'll just F2P" before starting. That resolve came tumbling down on the very first day. Now I think along the lines of, "I'm the original author, right? Collecting every single character's practically my duty, isn't it? It's fine, it's fine; it'll all ultimately come back to me via licensing fees or something like that. Yep, exactly—me spending here is basically free. It's free, I tell you. Look, now there ain't a thing to be worried about anymore." And so, I've been playing happily every day. Yes, *happily* playing, okay? Man, I had so much fun with Pazudere today too! Yep, this is what a person who, having passed thirty with a decent amount of money to spare, looks like when they're playing a mobile game for the very first time! …I don't know why, but my Grandpa's face is popping into my head now—the guy who taught me mahjong when I was still in elementary because "it'll ruin your life if you only get into it after you become a uni student." Maybe it would've been better if I'd gotten into mobile games back during my student years, from when I had less money to throw around. That would've definitely helped keep my spending in check, or something like that~. By the way, you can enjoy the game just fine without spending any money if you're not trying to collect *every* single character like I am. There's a ton of characters with different hairstyles and outfits; I highly recommend it.

Now then, next up's the story about the anime afterparty that took place this January. It happened at this luxurious venue, and all the anime staff, cast members, and other related people were there. And who do you think gave the opening speech? Yep, me. The original author. Of course, my opening line had long been decided. I started off with a greeting in Russian, followed by a, "My bad; got so nervous that my Russian slipped out." Everyone was kind enough to laugh. I even threw a killer pass to Kohei Amasaki-san, Masachika's voice actor, who was standing in front of the stage, saying "It worked, Masachika; they laughed!" And true to his nice-guy reputation, Amasaki-san caught it perfectly and got things super hyped up. Man, my fondness for the guy just keeps rising with no end in sight. After that, the main staff members involved in the anime's production each gave speeches on stage, and I couldn't help but feel my chest tighten with emotion when they did. "So many people have poured so much passion into this…!" I had thought. I

truly believe that Roshidere's anime has become a blessed piece of work surrounded by wonderful people. Following that, it was the cast members' turns to give their speeches, and just as that was starting, Wakana Maruoka-san, Yuki's voice actress, came rushing in through the venue's doors (probably coming straight from work) with an "I made it…!" and pattering steps. She looked so perfectly like Yuki in that moment that Tenamachi-sensei, the manga adaptation's mangaka, and I couldn't help but exclaim, "It's Yuki…!" out loud together. As for the shocking call-and-response gig that Maruoka-san did on stage, please refer to Tenamachi-sensei's afterword in Volume 7 of the manga adaptation.

After that, Sumire Uesaka-san and Amasaki-san both took on the role of being emcees, hosting a huge raffle. Each person was actually given a lottery ticket that had a number on it, with Uesaka-san and Amasaki-san drawing the winning numbers. That's how it went. The purpose of this huge raffle (or rather, the whole anime afterparty itself) was to mainly show appreciation to everyone who had contributed to the anime adaptation's production. While prizes were offered by the various companies involved, I too offered a prize as the original author. Anyway, one of the prizes happened to be a four-flavor ramen set, and lo and behold, number 333 was drawn. "What's your number, Sensei!?" Amasaki-san had asked me, but I unfortunately wasn't number 333. "Number 91," I had answered honestly. However, even after that, no one claimed the number as theirs (maybe the actual winner had left early?). So, that made him go, "Alright, then it's Sensei!" and I ended up being proclaimed as the winner of that ramen set. "What's the point in you making me win this?" I had voiced in my mind at the time, but given it didn't seem all too expensive, I figured it was fine. I ended up accepting it gratefully; it was delicious. Then came the time for the prize I had provided. "Could you please present this one yourself, Sensei?" a staff member at the venue had suggested, so I took the prize in hand and headed to the stage. Subsequently, number 91 was drawn. "What's the point in *myself* making me win this!?" I said out loud this time. Out of the more than 300 numbers, my own prize ended up going to me. Like seriously, what sorta miracle was this? I ended up drawing another number in order to give it to someone else. Later on, the cards for numbers 91 and 333 became something the male voice cast members all gathered to take pictures of, saying things like, "They seem kinda lucky."

It was a really funny sight. Everyone had really gotten along so well, and it was truly heartwarming to me. I took a photo too, just for the record.

Well, there's still a ton I wanna talk about, but since I'm running out of pages, I'll sum it up: it was a truly wonderful gathering where I could feel the raw passion and love from everyone involved in Roshidere's anime adaptation. I'd like to take this opportunity to once again extend my heartfelt thanks to all the people involved in the production of its first season. Now then, using that as momentum, let's move on to the acknowledgments. I would like to thank Suzuki-sama, who once again took charge of editing following the Behind The Scenes volume. Thank you so much for giving your all to support my extremely last-minute manuscript submissions. Next, once again, to Momoco-sensei, who met my overly detailed requests with incredible illustrations beyond perfection as per usual. Thank you very much as always. And continuing, to Tenamachi-sensei, who continues to spin Roshidere's story in a way that offers a different charm from the original work and the anime. Thank you for all the fun we had at the anime afterparty. I look forward to working with you again. Lastly, I would like to express a deep gratitude that goes beyond reason to Miyagawa-sama, my lead editor who is always taking care of me; to Katou-sama, who oversees merchandising; everyone involved in this series' publishing; and to all my readers who have been reading Roshidere. Thank you very much! Here's to meeting again in the next volume's afterword!

こんにちは！
ボツになった表紙の
背景です。（ちがい
わかるかな…？）
今回の
＃ロシデレも
よろしくおねがい
します。
momo

[1]: Yeah nah I don't know how to convert all the different mandarin diacritics/tone markers to long vowels lol so I'll just write them as how they're meant to be written. Also for fucks sake the font I'm using (Georgia) doesn't display these tone markers correctly. Shit goes from ǒ to ǒ.

Also thanks to Hugs for helping me verify all the pronunciations I had down (I'm a white-washed, banana soundin' ahh chink, you see; he can actually speak mandarin instead of making his ancestors roll in their graves like I do).

[2]: Yoshi from Super Mario if it wasn't already obvious.

[3]: Literally because it sounds like "Jinn". Arabic term for genie, basically. Or rather, "genie" is just an anglicized term for it.

[4]: The kanji writing system just consists of Chinese characters, hence why said characters are also used in Taiwan, where mandarin is predominantly spoken.

Bookwalker Exclusive Bonus: Side Story - Alya's Bride Training (?)

"Delicious..." Alisa couldn't help but express her delight as she bit into the handmade Baumkuchen that Masachika had given to her at her birthday party.

Its crumb was moist, smooth, and carried a gentle sweetness. By contrast, the coarse sugar sprinkled all across its surface gave a crisp yet pleasant change in texture, delivering a punch of sweetness to her tongue.

"It's really delicious..."

It was none other than the birthday present from her election partner. Alisa had been savoring it over the past few days now, carefully rationing each piece...

Just then, a certain concern suddenly came to mind.

Could it be... Masachika-kun's actually better at making sweets than I am? she thought.

As a maiden—and as someone born with an unyielding competitive spirit—such an anxiety inducing idea was something she could absolutely not overlook. Though at the same time, it was, of course, something she had already suspected for a while now. The notion that Masachika was probably better at cooking than her.

He usually lives alone... Seems like he cooks for himself...

Of course, Alisa was someone who could cook too. It wasn't that she couldn't, but rather... it was more of the fact that the dishes she could only really confidently make were limited to ones she had learned from her mother and grandmother. Sure, she had the basics down—cracking eggs, chopping veggies, and what not—but she still couldn't prep fish or fry food. To be honest, being able to proudly declare "I can cook" was a level she wasn't at yet.

I thought that was good enough up until now, though…

Alisa, despite being someone recognized as a perfectionist by both herself and others, had never thought to actively hone her cooking abilities up until now. It had simply never been a priority to her; a student's main duty, above all, was studying, after all. Cooking was something she always thought she could pick up when the time came for her to live on her own.

And yet…

All the other student council members are pretty good at cooking, aren't they…?

Maria, someone who already had a passion for making tea, was also pretty skilled when it came to being in the kitchen. Yuki and Ayano seemed to be better-than-average cooks as well, and even Chisaki—the person you'd least expect to be able to cook—had apparently been making bentos for Touya from time to time. I mean, it was supposedly always just fried chicken, but still…

If she's able to make fried food, doesn't that mean she's better at cooking than I am? Alisa reasoned with the thought, before then concluding from all of the above to eventually reach a certain hypothesis. *Could it be… I'm the worst when it comes to cooking in the student council, excluding Prez…?*

Oh, by the way, I will add that the last bit was entirely speculation on the assumption that Touya couldn't cook. It was something Alisa had never confirmed herself. But if that assumption proved wrong, then it meant that the person who was the worst at cooking would be none other than…

Yeeeah, that's not it. It can't be; there's no way. Yes, absolutely not, she convinced herself, guarding the last bit of her pride.

Even so, ranking sixth or lower out of seven was something unthinkable for Alisa to accept.

So, that now leads us to…

"Um, Mom…?" Alisa called out to her mother on a particular weekend morning.

“Hm~? What is it, Alya-chan?”

“Um…, could you… teach me how to cook?” she asked, with Akemi—who’d been washing the dishes in the kitchen—widening her eyes at the very question uttered by her second daughter.

But even so, as she stared intensely at Alisa’s face—who had slightly averted her gaze as she had made her request—her eyes lit up with excitement.

“Oh my, oh my! My my my~?” she chirped in a slightly teasing tone.

“W-what is it…?”

“Could you be looking for… bride training!? Are you thinking of making a bento for someone!?”

“Huh? It’s not like that…” Alisa denied it easily with a straight face, truly not meaning it in that way this time around.

Yet, once this mother of hers got like this, there was no stopping her to even listen at all…

“You’ll need to make something that tastes good even when cold in that case, wouldn’t you!?” Akemi continued in elation.
“For now, what should we start with…? *Hmm~*, as I expected, rolled omelets are a classic when it comes to making a bento, aren’t they?”

“There’s no need to insist on making one…”

“Don’t worry, Alya-chan! Your taste testers are already on standby!”

“Eh?” Alisa muttered in confusion, following her mother’s gaze to only see Maria sitting in the living room with a cheerful smile, wondering just how long she’d been there. “Why are *you* here…?”

Her tone was nothing but dry, yet such an obvious and honest observation held no meaning when in the presence of her mother and elder sister together. And so, for a reason she had the foggiest idea about, Alisa found herself making a bento. Two, no less…

★·☆·★

"What am I supposed to do with this…?"

It was currently Monday morning, and Alisa found herself at a loss as she looked down at the bento box inside of her tote bag (one that was thoughtfully the same men's-sized one her father usually used).

She had no choice but to give it to someone—she had already brought it all the way to school, after all. And as for who that someone is, the choice naturally narrowed down to just one candidate…

But how am I supposed to give it to him…?

She was confident about its taste as both her mother and sister had given their seal of approval. That wasn't the problem. The real problem was when, and under what pretext, could she hand it over. That was the greatest hurdle.

Or rather, Masachika-kun might've already brought his own lunch today too…

It would mean checkmate on the spot if that were the case. Far too harsh of a scenario.

Hmmmm… Alisa held her head in thought as she sat at her seat, all the while Masachika entered the classroom, arriving at school slightly earlier than usual.

"Mornin', Alya," he greeted her.

"Ah, yes. Good morning," she returned a hello of her own, with Masachika not noticing the slight awkwardness to it at all.

Setting down his bag, he casually checked his phone and frowned…

"Hey, Alya. Did you check your messages?" he then asked.

"Hm? What is it?"

“No, um, Masha-san’s saying that she wanted help looking for something…” Masachika explained, with Alisa checking her phone the moment he finished with his words.

And, sure enough, there was Maria’s message in the student council’s group chat saying as much.

“…You’re right, it’s there.”

“Yeah. Oh well~… It’s whatever…” Masachika, still holding his phone, then wore a thoughtful expression, causing Alisa to raise an eyebrow.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just thought I could’ve grabbed some lunch from the school store while I could, but…” Masachika started. “Welp, guess I’ll be doin’ that in break now.”

Coming to such a conclusion on his own, he then set down his bag and promptly stood up, intending to head to the student council room. Alisa hurriedly stood up in tow… before then—albeit only after a brief moment of hesitation—picking up her tote bag and following after him.

And so, the two of them made their way to the student council room to help with her sister’s request… Or so it should’ve been.

“Ah, thanks for coming, you two, but *sorryyyy*~,” Maria greeted them with her hands pressed together in apology the moment they arrived. “I actually happened to find it just a moment ago~”

“Even though we’ve come all the way here…” Alisa complained, with Maria’s words having immediately deflated her spirits.

“I’m *reeeeally* sorry, m’kay~? Did you have something to do?”

“Not really. It’s fine…”

“Ah, wait… Think I can still make it now…” Masachika then muttered under his breath with a quick glance to his watch, causing Alisa’s ears to perk up.

Taking a few seconds for hesitation again, she then finally steeled her resolve and stepped forward.

“Um, Masachika-kun…”

“Hm?”

“Um, here… As a thank-you for the baumkuchen you gave on my birthday…” Alisa blurted out the first excuse that came to mind, thrusting the tote bag entirely toward Masachika’s way.

“Huh? Ah, thanks…” Masachika accepted it almost reflexively with rapidly blinking eyes. “Was it good? The baumkuchen, I mean.”

“Yes, it was really delicious… indeed,” Alisa answered in an awkward yet soft, feminine tone. “It really… got me inspired too, I guess? It kind of made me want to cook as well, or something like that…”

“*Ohhh…?* Ah, wait, this is a bento? *Whooaa*, thanks!”

“*Mm…*” Alisa fiddled with her hair, quickly averting her gaze in face of Masachika’s delighted reaction.

Smiling at her incredibly obvious display of embarrassment, Masachika then smoothly shifted his gaze toward Maria.

This much’s fine, right, Masha-san? he conveyed with his eyes.

Beaming while completely being in big-sister mode, Maria—who’d actually explained the whole situation to him via text the day prior—gave a firm thumbs-up in response.

【Thank God…】Alisa then murmured, completely unaware of the two’s kindness.

It was just a single phrase, yet one conveyed with such genuine happiness and relief that it made Masachika and Maria gaze at her with even softer eyes. Alisa, on the other hand, continued to remain blissfully unaware of it all, the corners of her lips having curved into a faint but sweet smile.

Fan Translator's Note

Yo. Thanks for reading our fan translation of Roshidere Volume 10! We hope you enjoyed it as much as we did. Feel free to take the time to rate the series on Novel Updates if you did!

I'd like to express my gratitude to Ikea, AmadCSK, and gorg for editing and proofreading, Indi for helping us with typesetting the cover and colored illustrations, and to Iviera for coloring the chapter illustrations.

Anyway, who let Sun^3 cook lol? I actually really enjoyed this volume; the first four chapters were peak fucking shit. Like, the reason I was able to pull off translating three chapters within that first week was because of how much I was enjoying myself (I think I pulled like three all nighters in that week alone, lol). And like what, only 1 or 2 filler chapters? I used to pray for times like this. The one year wait was really worth it in my opinion.

This volume was also pretty hectic to translate for me; not because of the volume itself but the circumstances around it. From losing our Wordpress (we've migrated to glucosetl.xyz/ btw), to needing to translate Gimai Seikatsu Volume 14 at the same time, to being super busy in my lab as an undergraduate researcher, it really was overwhelming at times. I basically had to sacrifice all social life and my other hobbies (okay no tbf I did get into Umamaxxing starting in August) given my translating pace is pretty slow, but oh well, being able to finish Volume 10 in around 1.5 months (despite having another series to translate) made it all worth it.

I was also able to ride on the high of Chelsea winning the CWC (best team itw now btw; sorry I don't make the rules) in mid July, so that was nice. Yes I am looking for an excuse to mention this here :3

There's no news about Volume 11 yet, but here's hoping that it's good. I'll definitely be translating it when it comes out. We'll catch you all there!

Oh right, I gotta get around to finishing Volume 9.5 too 💀

Feel free to check the other series we fan translate too (you can check them on our website)! Definitely join our Discord server as well (we aren't announcing our chapters on the fandom discord anymore, so join ours if you'd like to be notified for chapters or any developments).

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